

THE BIG FRONTIER WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢



44 Western

MAGAZINE

APRIL

BRAND OF THE DESERT DAMNED

THRILLING
SAGA OF
OLD ARIZONA
by **MARVIN
L. DeVRIES**

**TEXAS LAW
COMES LOADED!**

by **WILL C. BROWN**

**CARPENTER
LATHAM · WINDAS
SHAFFER**

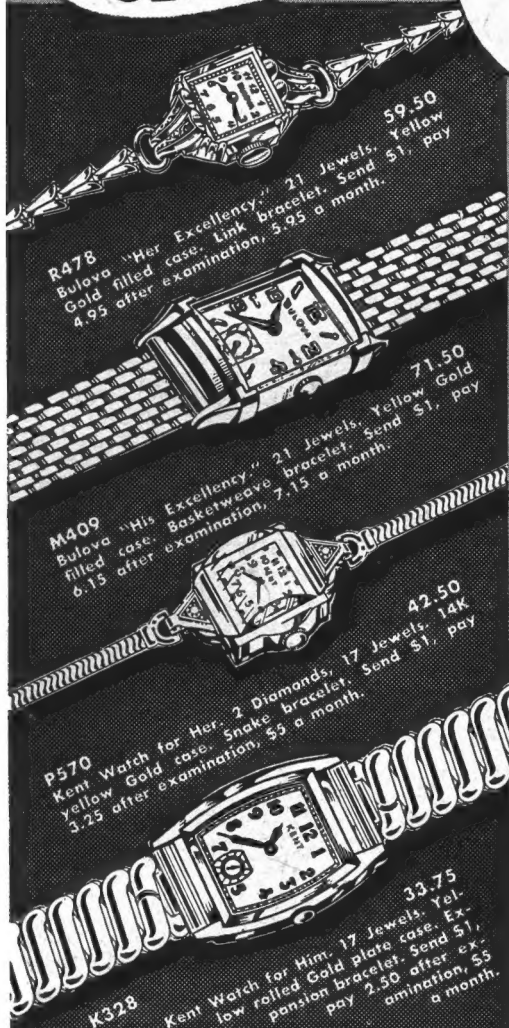
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... AND THEN DAN SAVED THE DAY



WOW! A DEAD STICK
LANDING AND HE'S
SNAPPED A SKI!

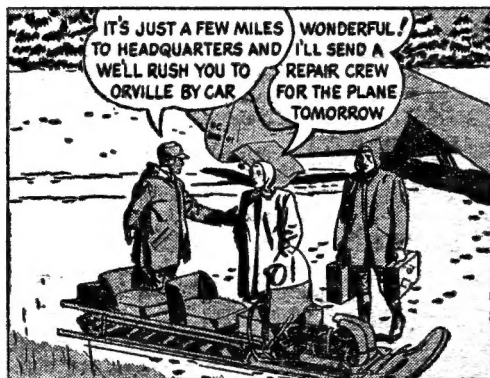
LET'S GET OVER
THERE. HE MAY
BE HURT!

RIDING THEIR MOTORIZED-SLED, TWO STATE
GAME WARDENS ARE RETURNING FROM A
LONG WOODS PATROL WHEN ...



ARE YOU
HURT, MISS?

NO, BUT I'M DARNED MAD.
MY ENGINE CONKED OUT
AND NOW I'LL MISS
THE ICE CARNIVAL



IT'S JUST A FEW MILES
TO HEADQUARTERS AND
WE'LL RUSH YOU TO
ORVILLE BY CAR

WONDERFUL!
I'LL SEND A
REPAIR CREW
FOR THE PLANE
TOMORROW



I DO HOPE WE'LL
MAKE IT. MY
APPEARANCE IS
SET FOR EIGHT
O'CLOCK

SAY! YOU MUST BE
SANDY OLTNER, THE
FLYING FIGURE
SKATER!
AND I LOOK
LIKE A TRAMP



REID'LL GET YOU
THERE WITH TIME TO
SPARE, MISS OLTNER.
HOW ABOUT IT, DAN?

YES, SIR... I'LL
EVEN HAVE TIME TO
CLEAN UP HERE FIRST



BLADES?
TRY THESE



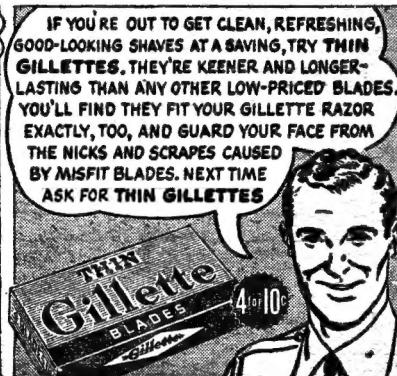
HERE'S THE
BLADE I'VE
BEEN LOOKING
FOR! NEVER
HAD SUCH
SMOOTH
SHAVING

THIN GILLETTES
ARE MADE TO
ORDER FOR TOUGH-
BEARDED GENTS



OUR COMMITTEE
IS GIVING A LITTLE
PARTY FOR SANDY
LATER. WILL YOU
JOIN US?

THIS IS MY FIRST
GOOD LOOK AT YOU,
MISTER... YOU'RE
HANDSOME!
PLEASE
DO!



IF YOU'RE OUT TO GET CLEAN, REFRESHING,
GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN
GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LONGER-
LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES.
YOU'LL FIND THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR
EXACTLY, TOO, AND GUARD YOUR FACE FROM
THE NICKS AND SCRAPES CAUSED
BY MISFIT BLADES. NEXT TIME
ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES





44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 20

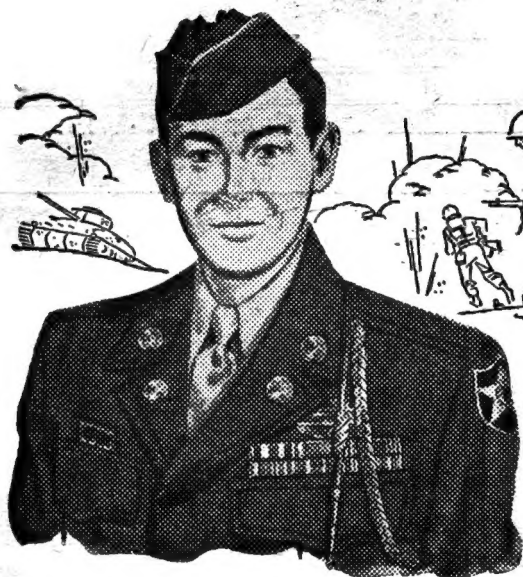
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TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



Caleb Horne rodded the outfits that took the last of Chisholm's herds on the long trek from Texas to New Mexico. Murder, mayhem, drought or flood were all in the day's work. One such day, when Tom Riggert's band of toll-collecting bandits attempted to stop Cal's Red River Crossing, should prove a good example.



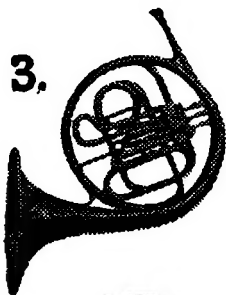
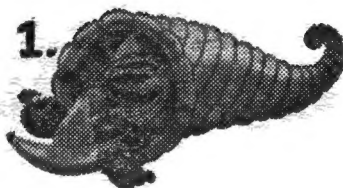
Riggert's outrageous demand for "four bits a head" to allow the herd safe passage was refused. Anticipating Riggert's move, Cal had ordered his riders to let the cattle drift, and to take up strategic positions covering the crooked gang. A battle ensued in which Riggert's and several of his renegades were killed and the rest dispersed.



Hampered by the loss of two of his own men, Cal next set about the hard grind of gathering his stampeded cattle. Thunderheads were banking in the western sky before this chore was finished. Fearing that the threatening storm might make the river impassable, the intrepid trail-boss decided to make the crossing in the gathering darkness.



The storm broke before Cal's job was half finished. Followed hours of grueling effort as rain drenched riders worked amid a bedlam of thunder, lightning and bawling cattle. Scores of times cowboys risked life and limb to haze frantic steers over the rushing torrent. But by dawn the last few stragglers climbed the further bank, and the perilous job was done.



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BRAND OF THE

Epic Novel of the Old West

By Marvin DeVries



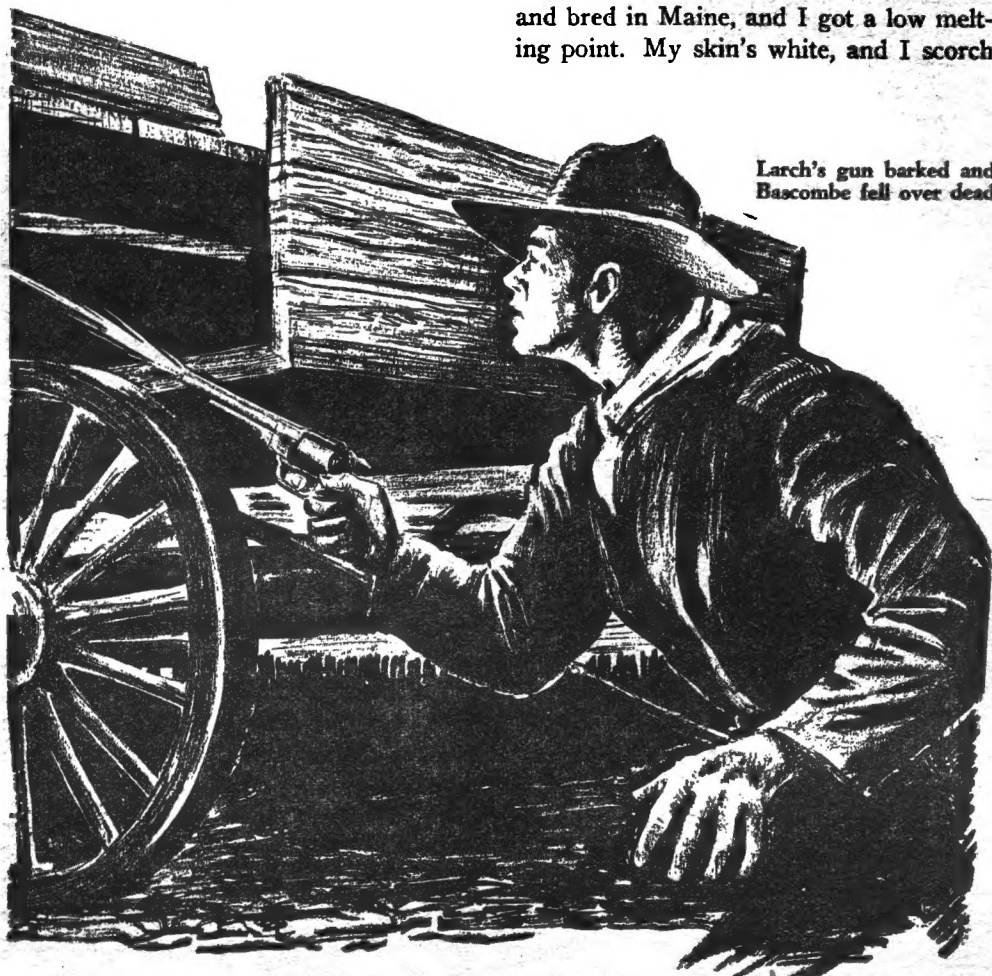
DESERT DAMNED

Four men, shot in the back under that hell-hot sun of the desert wasteland, came back from their lonely graves to free Private Larch Regan, U. S. Army, from his Yuma dungeon, and send him on a lonely, twisting trail, that would bring him a chance for an empire's gold—and to one last roll-call beneath the snarling guns of bushwhack killers!

CHAPTER ONE

Wagon Wheels West

LARCH REGAN'S brains were bubbling and boiling like a potful of stew on a hot stove. He wouldn't have been surprised to see them come seeping out of his ears, and once the crust was broken he would melt down to his heels like a lit candle, sputtering and fretting itself away. "I don't want to complain," he told his companion, Boomer Yount, who was riding a ragged buckskin with a mean disposition, "but I was born and bred in Maine, and I got a low melting point. My skin's white, and I scorch



Larch's gun barked and Bascombe fell over dead

easy. The heat's got under my skull, and my brains are bubbling. I shouldn't be out here in this desert country."

"Me neither," Boomer agreed, "but when you're in the army you go straight to hell if that's what you're told to do."

"Sure, if there's a good reason," Larch conceded.

"Reason, or no reason," the Boomer claimed.

Larch pursed his cracked lips. "I ain't so sure of that."

"Then you still got some things to learn."

"Take this outfit," Larch went on, pointing at Bascombe's wagons with a sun-burned thumb. "It's going to hell sure, but I don't reckon we're obliged to trail along."

"That's up to Sergeant Hume."

"And he doesn't know cats from dogs, or if he does he's keepin' it secret. Hell, he's a supply sergeant." This last came with utter scorn.

"Why don't you tell him your sad story?"

"I did. I've been bellyachin' all over the place, you know that. Last I heard from him I was to mind my own business."

"That sounds reasonable anyway," the Boomer said.

"I wouldn't give a whoop, but I'm worried about Shannon—Miss Shafter, I mean."

"Oh, calm yourself." The Boomer was a shrimp in the saddle. Officers back at Fort Yuma resented him because he couldn't put on a stitch of fooferaw when they wanted to make a military show. He bounced around in the saddle like a rabbit on a snare pole. He got saddle sore, and fretted and fussed like he had bees in his pants. His pip-squeak voice on roll call sounded like he was making fun of an important occasion. But in Larch's book he would do to ride with on a hard trail, as this one, from Yuma to Tucson, was turning out to be. "I reckon," the Boomer

went on, "she'll take potluck with the rest of us." It was a compliment, not callous indifference.

"You don't take potluck when the pot's empty."

"Well, you can't take her in your arms, either, and carry her the rest of the way, much as you would like to, from what I seen."

"Miss Shafter's the Major's niece," Larch reminded him stiffly. "You talk like she's a camp follower, or somethin', and I resent it."

"I got respect for her," the Boomer insisted, "but she's still a girl, and men fall in love with 'em, regardless of who their kin may be. It's impossible to change nature."

Larch changed the subject, swinging it back to what had touched off his train of thought. "I'll tell you this much, Boomer, we've had more trouble and breakdowns on this pasear than a dog has pups, and I think there's something funny going on here."

"I can't see it that way," the Boomer muttered dryly.

"Wagon wheels built like those are don't just crumple up of their own accord."

"And they don't get fixed of their own accord neither," the Boomer said. "I s'pose we might as well ride in and give the driver a hand. From what I seen so far nobody else will."

The wagon looked like a drunk in the gutter, the right rear wheel spread flat on the ground, with felly, spokes, and hub all in splinters. Cy Shone, the driver, had sent his swamper, a breed of some kind by the name of Nadal, back a piece to look for the tire, but it wasn't to be found within easy riding distance. Sergeant Hume, and the other two troopers making up the escort—they were all from B Company except Sergeant Hume—probably smelled work, and kept away.

FIG BASCOMBE, who owned the two wagons and trailers, and had an army contract to carry supplies from Yuma to scattered military posts inland, stood beside the wrecked wheel, and threw a fit, tearing out his scraggly black hair, and cussing a blue streak. He was a big-built man, but hard living and debauchery had made him a flabby, surly wreck, loud-mouthed and obscene. Larch had to tell him to mind his manners when he saw Miss Shafter approaching.

"Manners, hell," Bascomb flared. "You can't have manners when you're broke down. How in hell you goin' to get it fixed?"

"It's quite all right," Miss Shafter assured him with a faint smile. She rode a pretty army animal someone had taken considerable pains to gentle. Her uncle, Major Shafter, was commandant at Fort Yuma. Her first name was Shannon. From barracks talk Larch Regan knew the Major was her only kin. All the young officers at the fort were in love with her, but he knew she was promised to one. It was said Lieutenant Torrence, who was in charge of the Quartermaster's Supply Depot on the Yuma side of the river, went completely off his feed, and threatened to commit suicide when she turned his proposal down. Naturally, Larch had seen very little of her at the fort, but on this trip she had taken to riding beside him, in preference to the sergeant's company, and he felt free and easy when she did. Free and easy wasn't all he felt. The Boomer had hit the nail right on the head, although Larch hardly dared admit it even to himself as yet. She was taking this cross-country route back east, in preference to the long way around by boat from Puerto Ysabel, and the military escort was in her honor.

Cy Shone, the driver, insisted the wagon would have to be unloaded, but Bascombe wouldn't hear of it, claiming it could be pried up as it stood.

"What I want to know," Bascombe growled, "is how these things happen?"

"S'pose you tell me," Cy Shone threw back at him, quietly.

It didn't sound like a knowing dig, but it set Bascombe off on another tirade, and Larch wondered if Cy was intimating something he couldn't figure out from where he stood. Shannon Shafter moved out of earshot, and dismounted. Bascombe finally stalked off to the other wagon to find out why Al Inkster, the other driver, wasn't coming forward to give a hand, instead of staying back there on his fanny on the wagon seat.

Cy claimed it would take a day or more to get the thing repaired, if they could do it at all.

"Haven't you got an extra wheel, or at least some extra spokes and fellys?" Larch inquired.

"No. We used 'em all up."

"Then we sure are stalled."

"Yeah. We sure are. Bascombe's puttin' on an act, but he don't fool me."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean he's a damned crook. He's up to somethin'."

"They're his own wagons."

"That's all right."

"You think he's the one who sanded the axle grease?"

Cy Shone gave him a quick look. "How'd you know that?"

"Oh, I keep my eyes open. We're practically out of water, too, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

"And your mules are played out. They're dead on their feet. They've been fed loco weed, or something like that."

"Well, By God! I thought I was the only one who had eyes around here."

"And you figure Bascombe's behind it, eh?"

"Partly."

"Well, who else?"

Cy Shone hesitated for some time. Then he said, "Sergeant Hume."

Larch caught his breath. Then he grinned. "Oh, come off your perch."

"That's what I think."

"He's green as grass. He doesn't know cats from dogs."

"What's he doin' out here then?"

"He's a supply sergeant, but his enlistment is running out, and he asked for the assignment so he could see something of the country before he leaves for good. Lieutenant Torrence managed it for him."

CY SHONE growled in his throat. "That's sure nice, for that girl."

"We'll take care of her."

"You, or the sergeant?" "Well, he's in charge." "Sure, so you got to take his pap. What he says goes." "Up to a certain point." "Not all the way?" "Well."

"I'll tell you this much—we're all goin' to croak right here unless we pull out pronto with the horses, and let the rest go. That damn' Bascombe knows it. You know it. You been around."

"You're wrong about Sergeant Hume."

"I don't think I am." He straightened up suddenly, and went on in dead earnest: "I've been watchin' things, and I know that girl's took a shine to you, and you to her. If you want to get her out of this, you'd better do it on your own. That's the way it is. I'm telling you."

Bascombe was having a time, getting the other driver to come over and help. Cy Shone said he knew it would be that way. "There's some hard feeling between us. He pulled a knife on me a couple nights ago, and like to cut my throat."

"Well, I didn't know that."

"We kept it quiet, for the lady's sake."

"Why did he do it?"

"I was snoopin' around tryin' to find out about water. He came at me just when I had my head in a water barrel that was supposed to be full, but was bone dry. I like to got killed. He's on to what's goin' on, but he figured I was doin' it. I don't think I got it out of his head yet."

* * *

The argument at the other wagon was getting hotter. Al wouldn't budge. He said he would be damned if he would help Shone if they were tied up a month. "Don't think I don't know what's in the wind," he rasped, "and it's a damned dirty business. I don't want no part of it. Dirty, murderin' buzzards. I know what I'm talkin' about, and I know who's behind it."

Bascombe reached up, and tried to pull the driver down. Al pushed him off, and then came down, all at once, of his own accord, and shook his fist in Bascombe's face. Bascombe backed off, his hand closing around his gun butt.

"Just you try it, you fat greasy slob," Al roared, and went after his horse at the end gate of the wagon.

"Now what?" Bascombe demanded.

"I'm quittin', that's all," Al snapped back. "Right here and now, I'm quittin'."

"You can't do that," Bascombe yelled. "I can't, eh. You just watch." "Keep offn that horse, Al."

Al jerked at the tie rope, and went up in the saddle. "Now get outa my way, or I'll ride you down."

"Listen, Al," Bascombe bawled, "you ain't got any water."

"You either, unless you got it cached out somewhere. I won't get any of it, anyway. I know you."

"Get down, Al."

"Them jokers better be careful or somebody's goin' to get shot," Cy Shone remarked.

The Boomer had walked away from the stalled wagon, stiff-legged because he had sneaked a spoke down his pant's leg. He motioned Larch to follow, and when they were behind the wagon, he pulled it out, pointing at the thick hub end. "You see that?" he stated. "It's plain as day. Somebody took an ax to that spoke. There's more of 'em marked just like it."

Larch saw it. He was studying it so intently he missed the end of the argument between Bascombe and his driver. But he heard the shot that ended it, and when he looked, Al Inkster was going overboard off his horse in a headlong dive, and if he wasn't already dead before he hit the ground, the fall finished him, snapping his neck so Larch could plainly hear the sound. Bascombe was standing a short distance off with his smoking gun in his hand.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Gold Hoard

LARCH could see Shannon Shafter was badly shocked and he tried to ease her feelings with his talk. "You've got to figure it was something that was bound to break out between them sometime. They've been building it up between them a long time."

"He didn't give the driver a chance. He shot him in the back."

"I know, but Inkster was going to run off. Let's take a walk around."

The air was cooling off fast. When the fire-colors of sunset faded, the far-off mountains lost their shape, and took on the smoky look of clouds. By day a man could keep his eye on something nearby, and keep the desolation at bay, but now it came rolling at them like a tidal wave. Like a child Shannon took hold of his hand, and it smothered him with emotion. Finally he came to a stop and held her back. "I don't know how to say this," he spoke up at last, "because I don't want to scare the life out of you, but there's something going on here that you've got to know. It's been going on all along the way, a little thing here and a little thing there, and what happened to the driver is a part of it, I figure. Somebody's trying to get us in a fix out here, and it looks like we're in it right now. That wagon-

wheel was smashed with an ax, and there've been a lot of other things."

"I know. I've realized that, Larch. That's what upset me so. I thought I was the only one, and I didn't know what to do."

"Have you said anything to Sergeant Hume?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't trust him."

"I don't know." "I know we've got to get out of here—fast."

"Have you spoken to him?" "No. You know how he is." "Where could we go?"

"Back to the Gila. We've got to—to-night. When we get back to camp I'm going to say my piece. I'm going to throw it right in Hume's lap, and if he turns me down, I'm going to take it on myself."

"Larch, you can't do that. You'll get into trouble about it."

"Maybe so, but I've got to do it. The Boomer will stick with me, and maybe Cy Shone. The reason I took you out here is to find out if you will."

He heard her catch her breath. There was a long silence. Finally she said in a low, shaky voice: "No, I won't."

"Why not?" He sounded angry and dismayed, and made her look up at him.

"Because you're doing it for me, and I won't let you."

"All right. I'm doing it for you. Can't you figure out why?"

"I don't know, Larch. I—I—"

Suddenly his arms went around her, and he drew her close. For a second she tried to hold him off. Then her body went limp, and she drew his head down, and kissed his lips. He drew her closer still, and her sudden surrender shook him like a fever. He said things he couldn't remember later, words that made a song she would always hear.

"Larch, I'm so glad. Didn't you know until now how I felt?"

"I was scared stiff. The Boomer talked

to me. Even Cy Shone did, but—Lord Sake!”

He kissed her again, and they went back.

SERGEANT HUME watched them come, a tight disapproving frown on his face. He probably would have dropped down dead if he had known what had actually happened. He sat cross-legged at the fire, a gloomy look on his long grooved face, probably wishing he was back at the quartermaster's depot at Yuma. Will Peabody and Orlie Fitch, who, with Larch and the Boomer, made up the escort, sat beside him. Larch took a place on the opposite side of the fire, near the Boomer, and Shannon got her bright-colored blanket, and put it down near them. Cy Shone sat by himself throwing chips of rock at the fire, as if it were the most absorbing task he had found in many a day.

“Like I was saying,” Bascombe spoke up, obviously repeating for Larch's special benefit what he had said before, “we'll be tied up here a day or two, but when we get a-goin' again we'll hit Camp Grant in no time, and our worries will be over.”

“What are you going to do about water in the meantime?” Larch asked, letting his gaze drift past the sergeant's suddenly resentful eye to face Bascombe.

“The sergeant and me've talked it over,” Bascombe answered. “Ain't we, sarge?”

“Certainly,” Hume answered. “Everything will work out okay.”

“That's fine,” Larch said, keeping his voice pleasant. “How much water have you got?”

“Oh, enough,” Bascombe stated.

“Just how much is enough?”

“Now listen, Regan,” the sergeant broke in. “What do you think this is?”

“I don't know,” Larch answered, with an edge to his voice now. “I'm trying to find out.”

“I told you, Regan, I talked it over with him.”

Will Peabody and Orlie Fitch squirmed uneasily. The Boomer kept his head down, jerking it back and forth from speaker to speaker. Cy Shone quit throwing stones.

“You know as well as I do, Bascombe,” Larch went on, “that we can't make it. You took this short cut, and skipped water holes, and this last break-down cooked our goose.”

“Oh, come now, don't scare the lady.”

“It's true.”

“I don't want to augur with you, soldier. You do your augurin' with your sarge. We're doin' what we think best.”

Larch turned back to the sergeant. “I take it you mean to wait it out here?”

“One way or the other, Regan, I'll let you know when I want your advice about it.”

Larch hesitated briefly. He could still back down, and wait to see what happened. It would be a lot easier. He could get back to the Gila, and follow it down to Yuma, but he had no illusions about what would happen when he got back there and told his story. It would be the same for the Boomer, and any of the rest of the escort who chose to defy the sergeant. But he was convinced death lay in their path if they went on to Camp Grant and Tucson, and he didn't hesitate long, because what he had told Shannon outweighed everything else. He got to his feet, and his gun was in his hand.

“Regan!” Hume snapped, starting to get up.

“Sit down,” Larch told him.

“You're under arrest,” Hume barked.

Larch backed off a little so he could watch them all. “I know the only thing to do is to head back to the Gila right now, tonight, with our horses, and let the mules and wagons go. Bascombe knows it. So does Cy Shone. Isn't that right, Cy?”

"Dead right, soldier. I'm with you."

"I don't know about the two swampers, and you, Will, and Orlie. I just want you to hear what I know, and then you can make up your own minds what to do."

He told them what he had seen with his own eyes, the sanded axle grease, the ax marks on the spokes, the empty water-barrels that were supposed to be full. "I expect that won't be news to somebody, but to some of you it is, and you can make up your own minds what it adds up to, and what you want to do about it. That goes for you, too, Sergeant."

"**W**HY would anybody do a thing like that?" Will Peabody asked.

"I don't know." "You mean you won't say?" "No. I mean I don't know."

"There you are," Bascombe leered. "He talks his neck into a noose, and he don't know what in hell he's talkin' about."

"A noose won't be any worse than a bullet in the back, Bascombe."

"Dammit, Sarge, you goin' to stand for this?" Bascombe flared.

"You're under arrest, Regan," Hume sputtered again.

"Who's coming?" Larch asked.

Shannon and Boomer Yount, and Cy Shone got up.

"I'll get the horses," the Boomer offered.

"All three of you go," Larch said. "Call me when you're ready."

It took considerable time. Beads of sweat broke out on Larch's forehead. He shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Finally the Boomer called him, and he started to back off. The sergeant said something out of the side of his mouth to Will Peabody, but Will didn't budge. Unexpectedly, Bascombe took a hand. Larch saw him go for his gun, and threw a shot that scuffed up dust between Bascombe's legs, and his hands went out from his sides like a pair of wings. The sergeant

rolled behind some duffle, and started shooting. Neither Will or Orlie made a move. A bullet struck Larch's gun, but he hung unto the weapon, and fired back. Somebody let out a howl of pain, but he couldn't tell whether it was Will or Orlie, or the sergeant. The Boomer came running, and got him away. Cy Shone and Shannon were in their saddles. "Go on we're coming," Larch called to them, and climbed aboard.

THE BOOMER said he had heard of a cavalryman once up in Montana Territory who had had his buttons cut off, and swung on the parade ground for a whole day before he was cut down. "And about all he did was give some sass back."

"To a supply sergeant?" Larch asked.

"Well, now, if I recollect right, it was a lieutenant."

"That makes quite a difference."

"I wonder."

"Anyway," Larch suggested, "you better keep that kind of talk between the two of us."

"Oh, sure—sure. I wouldn't worry her pretty head. You spoken to her, ain't you?"

"Yeah."

"That night we pulled out from the wagons in a blaze of glory?"

"Yeah."

"And it came out all right, eh?"

"Right as rain, Boomer. I was crazy to do it, but I did."

"It's just like I said—that Major's niece business is all poppycock."

"We haven't spoken to the Major yet."

"No, that's true. You know, Larch, you and me could go over the hill when we get near enough to Yuma to let Cy and her go on alone."

"You could, Boomer. Not me."

"Why not?"

Larch pointed at Shannon as if that were answer enough. Every time he

looked at her, his heart stirred with pride. They all had had it tough, but she had never let out a whimper. They had had to lay over for a week when they first reached the Gila River because the Boomer was bitten by a snake, and couldn't be moved. Cy Shone had spent the time shooting rabbits, and whatever else he could find, and his small store of dried meat was keeping them alive now. Because he was a civilian he had nothing to worry about when they got back to Yuma, but he didn't crow. As much as anyone he tried to figure out exactly what it was they had left behind them, going over the ground again and again, man by man, from the swampers to Bascombe and back again, trying to figure out a reason for the empty water kegs, and the poisoned mules. He tried to tie the sergeant in on it, because Larch and the Boomer would need all the ammunition they could get hold of when they got back, but he couldn't make out any better with his thinking than the rest of them.

SHANNON was quiet and subdued, and when she spoke to Larch, the song in her heart touched every word, gentle as the brush of a wing, and proud and daring, too. "There'll be no shame in this for you, Larch," she had told him. "Not to me—and not to your sons and daughters, either."

"Lord's Sake—Shannon."

"That's how it is."

"I reckon we'll find some way out of it when we get back."

"Do or don't, you know how I stand."

The days and miles rolled behind them, nameless days and uncounted miles, and drew their desolate pictures in living flesh. The contours of the country changed as slowly as a slug turning over, but they noticed differences, and one day two men came riding out of the heat-haze ahead.

Cy Shone said he knew them, but he had never seen them a-horseback before.

"They're kind of sailors. They work on the river for Cap Baroneer. The short one's Barnacle Papp. The big fat slob's Ferd Liefer. Watch 'em close."

The two riders pulled up some distance off, and waited. They were an ugly-looking pair, and Larch didn't let his hand stray too far from his gun, although he could see no reason why they would make trouble. They recognized Cy Shone, and spoke to him.

Cy saved his answer until they came within easy-talking distance. Then he asked if they had gotten chased out of Yuma.

"Oh, no, nothin' like that," the fat Ferd answered. "We're just takin' the air."

"You can have my part of it," Cy muttered. "You got enough artillery there to take over the Territory."

"It comes handy," Barnacle said.

"Never seen you on a horse before, Barnacle."

"Never again, neither, I swear, Cy. Ferd's the horse-backer."

"Got any good grub?"

"Oh—a little of this and that."

"Let's light and make camp. It's near dark anyway."

"You ain't goin' to eat us outa grub."

"I wouldn't think of it," Cy stated. He noticed they showed special interest in Larch and the Boomer in their dusty, ragged uniforms, and when Larch asked them again, later, where they were bound for, Barnacle Papp gave him a shrewd look, and said they were going out to look for gold, watching to see what effect his statement would have.

"Minted or raw?" Cy asked.

Barnacle's eyes twinkled. "You're smart, Cy, smart as a cracker. Where would we find minted gold out here?" He laughed uproariously, but there was cunning and calculation behind it.

"I've heard tell of buried treasure."

"Yeah, me, too. Anything recent?"

"No."

Barnacle's knowing grin widened, as if he wanted to show he knew Cy was hiding something.

THEY carried their supplies on a pack animal, and complained mildly about getting eaten out of house and home, but it wasn't serious talk, and Cy paid it no mind, trotting out everything that took his fancy. He told them how they had made do with anything they could lay hands on, and his story touched a soft spot in Ferd Liefer's heart, because Ferd was a glutton, and lack of food was true torture. Ferd also eyed Shannon with considerable relish, but kept his thoughts on that score to himself.

Before dark, Cy walked them out of earshot, and sat down on a rock. He borrowed makings from Ferd, and rolled himself a smoke. When he had it lit he told them he was going to shoot some talk out of them. "I can draw twice as fast as the next man. Remember that. You been lookin' us over like a bunch of stray crocodiles, and I want to know why."

"Hell, Cy, you got us wrong," Barnacle protested, as if he were deeply hurt. "We ain't looked at nobody like they was crocodiles."

"Talk, or I'll turn you loose without your nags. You're river men and I want to know what you're doin' way off here."

"Take it easy, Cy. What're you so edgy about?"

"You're Cap Baroneer's men. Did he send you out?"

"Cap's in the pen, Cy," Barnacle stated in a sad voice.

"He is?"

"In Yuma pen, up on Prison Hill. They give him ten years."

"You boys'll have him out inside of one."

"I don't know if we can bust him out, Cy. We been figurin'."

"What's he in for?"

"They claim he stole government cash. You recollect that rumpus he had with the government some time back?"

Cy nodded. "Go ahead if it's got anything to do with what I want to know. Don't just gossip."

Under Cy's persistent prodding the story began to come easier. Less than two years ago Cap Baroneer had owned a boat called the Desert Queen, and was engaged in the business of ferrying the California gold rush across the Colorado River.

It was a good business, his profits running as high as sixty thousand dollars a year. During one of the frequent jail breaks from the Territorial Prison in Yuma, escaping prisoners had seized the boat, intending to make their getaway down river to Puerto Ysabel, and the craft had been sunk by fire from a Gatling Gun in the prison guard tower. Baroneer claimed damages in the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the value of the boat plus the loss of his estimated profits, and finally won an award of one hundred thousand. The cash, gold and currency, had been sent out to Yuma, but payment was stopped before it was turned over to Baroneer, because traffic had decreased considerably, and the government claimed the award was too large. Until a final settlement could be reached, the cash was kept under lock and key in the Quartermaster's Depot on the south side of the river. Baroneer had raised a howl, and made some wild threats, and Barnacle stated it was one of the things that looked bad on the trial, and got him ten years. "Cap threatened he'd go in there to the depot, and shoot that cash out with a Gatlin' Gun of his own if they didn't turn it over to him. He talked purty big, because he was so aff-fired mad, and then when the cash turned up missing they pinned it on him."

"When was it missed?"

"A couple days after Bascombe pulled

out of Yuma with supplies for Camp Grant," Barnacle said significantly.

"And you're tryin' to tell me that Bascombe took it?"

"That's the general idea."

* * *

"Judas Priest!" Cy muttered, suddenly convinced that what he was hearing was true. It fitted in with what had happened. Bascombe could afford to lose his mules and wagons if he would walk off with a hundred thousand dollars in gold and currency. He must have had it aboard with the supplies, and when he had gotten saddled with a military escort he had schemed and connived to get rid of it. "What makes you so sure Cap Baroneer didn't take it?" he asked, finally.

"If he had, he wouldn't be sendin' us out here on a wild goose chase, would he?" Ferd muttered.

"No," Cy agreed, "I guess he wouldn't."

"That's why we been lookin' you over like a bunch of crocodiles. You're Bascombe's driver. Then two troopers was in the escort. The girl went with. What happened?"

"Barnacle, I'll tell you," Cy said. "We cleared out because we smelled something fishy."

"You sure you didn't smell out the cash, and take it with?"

"Boy, if I did I'd be travellin' the other way, and I wouldn't stop till I got to New Orleans."

"It looks," Barnacle said, glumly, to Ferd, "like we got a long ride ahead of us."

"What're you goin' to do if you find him?"

"This artillery you spoke of will take care of that."

They went back to camp, and the next morning the two sailors pulled out. Cy Shone decided to keep to himself what

he had learned. He didn't want to build up any false hopes for Larch and the Boomer. It wasn't likely Barnacle and Ferd would ever catch up with Bascombe, and if they did Bascombe had artillery he could use, too. If Bascombe had that cash he would keep going until he was out of reach.

There was only one hitch in Cy's thinking. He didn't have Bascombe figured out right, as he realized two days later when they rode into Yuma, and saw him loafing on the gallery of Charlie Higg's deadfall with a toothpick in his mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

The Snake Den

IN DUE time, and with proper ceremony, Larch Regan and Boomer Yount got a court-martial, and were sentenced to twenty years penal servitude at hard labor. Until they could be transferred to the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, they were lodged in the main cell block of the Yuma pen on Prison Hill. As the Boomer said, they were lucky at that, because, from what he understood at the trial, they could have been hung.

"And that's what Sergeant Hume was aiming at, too," he insisted. "He made out he was twice as bad hurt as he was,"

"I should have shot up in the air," Larch remarked. "It would have done just as much good."

"You should've shot him between the eyes. At any rate, they should've let us say why we pulled out the way we did."

"The way they looked at it, it didn't matter why we did it. It was just a question of whether we did it, or not, and when that was settled, that was the end of it."

"I'm surprised Will Peabody and Orlie Fitch pulled out the day after we did, like Hume said. I didn't think they would have the guts. At any rate, they had

sense enough not to come back here."

"I should've made you light a shuck, Boomer."

"Since when have you had anything to say what I do?"

"Okay—okay."

"I wonder what they mean by 'hard labor'."

"Breakin' rocks I reckon. We'll find out."

Sergeant Hume and Bascombe had reached Yuma a day ahead of Larch and Boomer. The sergeant claimed they had abandoned the wagons and supplies after Peabody and Fitch and Bascombe's two breed swampers had run off. He testified that Larch had pulled a gun on him when he had tried to stop them, and had shot him in the shoulder. Bascombe could corroborate what he said. He claimed they had had a tough time getting back to Yuma, but they didn't look it. Both Hume and Bascombe looked well-fed, and watered. Neither Shannon or Cy Shone were permitted to testify, and, in truth, Larch couldn't see how it would have helped any. He hadn't had a chance to talk to either of them since the day they rode into Yuma and saw Fig Bascombe sitting in front of Charlie Higg's deadfall.

He felt a deep-down bitterness and dismay, and still he knew that if he had it to do over he would do again as he had done before. Shannon had told him there would never be any shame in this for him, but he felt shame for having taken her in his arms that night on the desert when he knew this lay ahead. And he would probably never know who had tried to destroy them, and why it had been tried.

The main cell block was a stone and mortar structure of thirty-four cells, with six bunks in each cell, tiered up along the walls, three high. South of this building was the Dungeon Block, sometimes called the Snake Den, an underground cave dug out of the solid granite, for incorrigibles of all kinds. The Entrance

Gate north of the main cell-block was the only way to get into the place. Or out of it.

Larch and Boomer went into a cell with two other prisoners. One of them was a horse-thief from Prescott by the name of Hutch Rider. The other was Cap Baroneer, who had served only a month of his ten-year term. Larch tried to be friendly, but couldn't get a word out of him. He was past middle age, with gray hair, piercing black eyes, and a knife scar along one cheek. He did exercises every morning. He had some contact with the outside, and occasionally a bribed guard handed him written messages. Once he got a package containing a dirk knife, which he hid cunningly along the framework of his bunk. Larch knew the story about the ferry, and the award he had never gotten, and felt sorry for him. The Boomer thought he was losing his mind.

ONE DAY this same guard gave Larch a message. It was from Cy Shone:

Give me some time and I think I can get you out of there. That place has been busted open before, and I will see what I can do. Maybe I can get you a gun. I know they're gettin' weapons in there. Don't do anything that will land you in the Snake Den, because I understand there ain't no way of getting out of there. I hear you're in the same cell with Cap Baroneer. I didn't tell you, but them two jaspers we ran into on the trail, Barnacle Papp and Ferd Liefer, claim Baroneer didn't steal that cash. They were going after Bascombe because that dinero turned up missing a couple days after we left Yuma with his wagons, and they figure it was in one of the wagons, because Bascombe had the run of the depot. *So did Sergeant Hume.*

That may explain some things. They were damned almighty thick together, but there's one trouble with that. The main thing that got Baroneer in that jam was that they found a piece of wrapping paper that had been used to send him some stuff from Monterey. It was found in the room where that cash was kept. It had the name of the boat on it, and Cap's name. Now here's the thing. That boat was at Puerto Ysabel before Bascombe pulled out, but the cargo didn't get up here to Yuma until after we left with the wagons for Camp Grant. So how could Bascombe have anything to do

with the hold-up, unless he left somebody behind to plant the thing on Cap Baroneer.

I don't know. I'm just figurin' and keepin' you posted. Bascombe's still here. He hangs around Charlie's. I had some words with him, and expect there will be more. Sergeant Hume is waiting for his discharge. I hear he expects to go down by a river boat, and get passage from Puerto Ysabel to San Francisco. I don't get this direct, of course. He ain't on any duty that I can see. See if you can get anything definite from Cap Baroneer about this business, and try to get it out to me.

The guards are almost all crooks over there, and you can use almost any one of them. I spoke to Shannon, and she's going to stay here a while now, at least till you get shipped off. She has told the Major about you and her, and I guess there was some awful fire-works, but she won't back down, Larch. You don't need to worry about that. Next time I write I'll get in a letter from her. Hang onto yourself. C. S.

LARCH showed it to the Boomer, who, for the first time since getting back to Yuma, showed some emotion. Tears came into his eyes, and his voice had lost most of its squeak when he said: "By God—we got a friend."

Larch tried to get Cap Baroneer into some talk, but it was a failure. Hutch Rider, the horse thief, said he hadn't spoken since he got in, which was all of a month. He made the remark as if Baroneer weren't there at all, and Baroneer acted as if he didn't hear a word of it. He showed no resentment or interest whatever.

But the next day he got another message from the outside, and it charged him with excitement. Words formed on his lips, words that never quite came out but made a rumble in his throat. His excitement grew, and a sharp, cunning look came into his eyes. At last, of his own accord, he spoke. "I was right," he snapped, in his sharp, precise way. "Barnacle says I was right."

"Is that message from Barnacle?" Larch asked, trying to sound as if they had talked together a hundred times.

"They found Bascomb's wagons."

"Will that do you some good, Cap?"

The Boomer and the horse-thief were asleep on their bunks, and the talk didn't arouse them. Larch felt his pulse pound. There must have been more to the message than that, or it wouldn't have stirred Baroneer up like it did.

Baroneer raced on with growing excitement: "They found four corpses in a blown-out grave nearby—two soldiers, and two Mexicans. All four were shot in the back."

Larch's breath stuck in his throat. He knew who the four would be—the two breeds, and Will Peabody and Orlie Fitch. Sergeant Hume had been lying then when he testified on the trial that they had deserted. They had been shot down, and it proved what Cy Shone had intimated in his letter, that Hume and Bascombe were in it together. And it proved beyond the slightest doubt that he and the Boomer had done right in pulling out.

Baroneer watched him suspiciously. "You shot them," he charged, suddenly. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Now, listen, Cap," Larch said, quietly, "I wasn't there. I pulled out before hand."

"And you know where that cash is."

"No I don't, Cap. Just take it easy now, and we'll try to figure it out."

"You know. You know all about it."

"No, I don't, Cap." Larch went on, softly as before. "You don't understand what went on out there."

BARONEER gave him a wild, glaring look, terrible in its ferocity, and stubborn, insane determination not to be blocked by lies, or soft talk, and then he sprang straight at Larch, and the knife he kept hidden in the framework of his bunk was in his hand.

Larch flung himself sideways, rolling as he went, and the knife cut a furrow up his back from his pants top to his neck, but it was only skin-deep, and he got to

his feet, and backed off down the narrow aisle. Even Baroneer had sense enough to keep quiet. A fight like this would send them both to the Snake Den, but the frenzied man meant to find out what he thought Larch knew. He lunged again, and Larch got a cut along his hand, between his thumb and fore-finger, as he squirmed out of reach between the bunks, and backed off the other way.

Baroneer landed against the wall, but it didn't hurt him any. It only made him careful, and this time he came at Larch like a stalking cat, ready to block any move Larch made. He backed him into the corner, his hot, peppery eyes slitted shut, sucking in his breath between his teeth with a whistling sound, his face blotched white and reddish-purple, as if he might drop dead in his tracks.

Larch was cramped for space, blocked off by the bunk on one side, and the sweep of the knife on the others. Finally, it came at him again, like the swift rush of a humming-bird. Larch went straight to the floor. For a second Baroneer loomed over him. Then Larch got his feet against the wall, and dived forward, close to the floor. His arms closed around Baroneer's legs, and the man went down with a thud that knocked the wind out of him. The knife swirled across the floor, and bounced against the far corner. Larch straddled Baroneer, and held him down.

The Boomer came out of his hot siesta, and saw what was going on.

"Get him on his bunk, quick," he whispered. "The screw's coming."

It was too late. The guard came inside, and before Larch could get to his feet, he hit him over the head with a long rubbery sack of shot he carried in his pocket.

Larch went down like a shot horse, and he didn't get his eyes open again until a long time later. He tried it several times, and went woozy each time, but finally he managed it, and he thought his head would split open at the same time. He didn't even realize he was in new surroundings, until he heard someone say: "Welcome to the Snake Den, pard!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hang Me Twice!

IT WAS a dark and gloomy place. The walls were cut out of the solid knob of granite that pushed out into the river like a sore thumb. The smell in the place turned his stomach. He tried to get up, and then, for the first time, realized he was chained to a ring in the floor. He heard someone groan, and recognized Baroneer's voice.

"I'm Frogleg Johnson," another prisoner spoke up in a thick, rasping voice. Then, more carefully: "You want to buy into a bust-out?"



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There was a long silence.

"You talking to me?" Larch asked, finally.

"Yeah."

"Why, sure—I'll buy into it. For how much?"

"A hundred bucks." "I can give you fifty."

"All right—fifty it is. Don't forget. I'll call on you for it."

"Any time."

"That makes six of us. I guess that old geezer who came in here with you can't move, cin he?"

"I don't know. What d'you aim to do?"

"You sit tight. I been workin' on this for a month. An' I'm making the play right now!"

A faint light sifted in from some unseen place, and Larch gradually got his bearings. Frogleg's chains rattled, but he didn't move from his place on the floor. Larch's nerves tightened up. He had no idea what Frogleg meant to do, but he didn't sound hair-brained. Whatever it was, it must have been carefully planned. Something like that couldn't be done on the spur of the moment.

"Once you're out, go for the west wall. There'll be ropes let down. If you get out, you're on your own. Regan, you go for the river. You got special accommodations."

"I have?" Larch wondered. It sounded like he was in on this even before he bought in.

"Don't let an Injun get hold of you," Frogleg went on. "They get fifty smackers bounty on every man they fetch back, dead or alive."

None of the others said a word. Frogleg started to move around. Somehow, he had gotten out of his chains. Larch didn't know it, but it had taken a month to do, with a piece of file. He came up behind Baroneer, and gave him a sudden, hard blow. Baroneer grunted, and tipped on

his side. Then Frogleg went back to his chains, and sat down. "Guard," he yelled, "this old geezer's croaked. Come and get him. We don't want any corpses in here to stink up the place."

The guard took his time, but he finally came. He carried a lantern, and held it high to look around. Then he set it down, and bent over Baroneer. Frogleg got to his feet. This time his chains didn't rattle. He moved carefully. Larch hardly dared to look at him, for fear of giving him away. His shadow moved along the wall, and climbed the ceiling as he came closer to the lantern. The guard must have noticed it. He started to turn, and then Frogleg struck, a hard rabbit blow with some kind of a bludgeon, and the guard went down without a sound.

Frogleg was methodical. He didn't waste any time, but he kept his head. He stripped off the guard's clothes, and got into them. They were a fair fit. He found the right key, and unlocked chains. He left Baroneer where he was, and he probably didn't care to know whether he had killed him or not. Finally he went for the door. "Stay where you are till I yell. Then come a-running."

He disappeared with the lantern, and there was another wait, long enough to set a man's nerves to screaming. But, at last, the yell came, and Larch went out with the rest. Another guard lay sprawled near the door, a trickle of blood running out of his nose onto the floor. Frogleg was outside heading for the wall. Larch followed him on a dead run. He reached the wall, and followed it along, fingers scraping against stone until he felt a rope. It had knots in it at intervals to get a grip, and he pulled himself up. A bullet spanged into the wall close to him, spattering grit into his face, but he made it to the top, and went over on the other side. He hit the ground hard, and started rolling, but he caught onto some rubble, and got his breath back.

"LARCH," somebody called softly.

He didn't answer until his name was called again, and he recognized Cy Shone's voice. Then he came down. A small rowboat stood against the shore. Shannon Shafter was in it, at the oars.

"Get in," Cy told him. "Don't talk now. Get down flat, and let her take you across. I'll see you later."

Larch got in the boat. Cy shoved it off, and vanished. Shannon started rowing. The oarlocks didn't make a sound. They must have been well-greased.

Shannon looked over her shoulder. "You're safe now, Larch. There's a uniform there. Change into it while I row across."

"How did you know what was going to happen? I don't understand this."

"Cy Shone fixed it."

"He did?"

"He knew the men who were trying to get Frogleg out, and threw you in with them. He sent a fake letter to Cap Baroneer, knowing it would stir up a fight between the two of you. That's how he got you into the Snake Den. It was the hardest place to break out of, so it stood the most chance of working."

"I see." What she told him gave him a sudden feeling of dismay. If the letter to Baroneer was a fake, then the news in it was false, too. Cy Shone must have built it up out of his own mind, and if it wasn't true, then there was no way of tying Hume in on all this. And he realized now, more than ever, that that was one thing he had to do before he could ever be a free man. He couldn't worry about it now, however.

"Everything will work out, Larch," Shannon told him. "It's got to."

"Lord," Larch exclaimed, suddenly, "this is an officer's uniform."

"I know it," Shannon answered, undisturbed. "It's Lieutenant Torrence's. I stole it. It's the easiest way to get inside."

"Inside what? The fort?"

"Yes."

Larch grinned for the first time in a long time at the sheer impudence of the plan. "Well, I might as well hang for one thing as another. Maybe it'll work."

The boat nudged against the shore. They got out, and she let the boat go. He kissed her suddenly, and her hands came up to his cheeks. Then she remembered the razor and soap she had brought. "You'll have to do the best you can in the dark with river water."

The gun-fire on prison hill across the river had died down. Two sentries stood at the stockage gate. Larch felt a shiver run up and down his spine. "They changed the guard after I left." Shannon whispered. "You're Lieutenant Torrence. We went out together for a walk along the river, if anybody asks. But they won't." The last of it sounded most like a prayer.

Larch kept his hat low over his face. He got a salute, and gave one back without looking, and hurried on. Shannon stopped, and talked briefly with one of the sentries. "There must be something going on over at Prison Hill," she said. "I heard a lot of gun-fire."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It was so nice along the river, but Lieutenant Torrence thought we ought to come back. If any prisoners escaped they might get across the river."

"Yes, ma'am," the sentinel agreed, emphatically.

Then she went on, and caught up with Larch again. "It's all right. They think you're Lieutenant Torrence. He goes back and forth so much because he's in chage of the supply depot across the river. They don't bother to check him in and out any more."

"You thought of everything, didn't you?"

"We tried to, Larch."

They walked past the parade ground, past B Company's quarters, and the bach-

elior quarters where Lieutenant Torrence and other unmarried officers lived. Major Shafter had a larger place on the far side of the parade ground.

"I better head for the horse barns," Larch suggested. "I can find a place to hide out."

"No. There's only one safe place for you to hide until all the excitement dies down."

"Where's that?"

"In my room."

Larch stopped in his tracks. "I can't do that."

"You've got to, Larch."

"No, I won't."

"You've got to have food and water. It's the only place I can get it to you. I know how you feel, Larch, but you've got to do it, for my sake."

"That would be a fine thing, if somebody caught me there."

"I wouldn't mind at all."

Larch put up every argument he could think of, but she wouldn't listen, and he finally gave in. They moved on toward the house. There was a light in one of the rooms, but she said her uncle was out. They almost reached the door, and then boots thumped solidly on the walk, coming toward them.

"Oh, Shannon, can you wait a moment," the man called. "I'd like to talk to you."

Larch had a wild urge to run, but he held it back, although he knew the man coming toward them was the man he was pretending to be—Lieutenant Torrence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Desert Treasure

LARCH touched Shannon's hand. It was icy cold, but she didn't lose her nerve. The Lieutenant said he thought she was alone or he wouldn't have bothered her. Then he gave Larch a sudden look,

and made a queer surprised sound. He probably didn't recognize Larch in the dark, or his own uniform either, but he knew Larch was a stranger. His glance shifted from Larch to Shannon, and back again, waiting for an explanation, and it came at last.

"It—it's Larch Regan, Lieutenant," Shannon said in a thin voice.

"Regan?" He searched his memory, and finally came up with the right answer. "Oh! Oh, yes. I—I see."

"I borrowed your uniform for him," Shannon went on.

"Well." The Lieutenant went over Larch from head to foot, then echoed blankly again: "Well, well."

"I—I knew you wouldn't mind," Shannon murmured.

"But—but I do."

"Oh."

"Are you mixed up in this, Shannon—this prison break?"

"Of course I am," Shannon answered, with rising impatience. "You've got to help us, Lieutenant."

"Me?"

"Certainly. You go moping around because the supply depot was looted. This is your chance to do something about it."

"How?"

"By helping Larch."

"I don't see the connection. Baroneer stole that money, and he's in the pen."

"You're stupid, Lieutenant, awfully stupid."

"I can't help you, Shannon. I'd be disgraced for life." He turned on Larch. "You'll have to come along with me."

Larch was quite sure the Lieutenant wasn't armed. He was young and green, and put a lot of faith in his rank, a little more than he ought to under the circumstances, Larch thought grimly. But Larch hadn't entirely made up his mind what he meant to do.

"Come along," Lieutenant Torrence ordered, a little more sharply.

Larch's shoulders slumped, and his head went down. It looked like he had given up, and meant to obey the Lieutenant's order. He took a step forward, and the Lieutenant moved back to let him past. But Larch didn't go past. He put all he had in one solid blow that caught the Lieutenant on the side of the head, and stretched him out limp on the walk.

The dead weight of dismay settled on Larch's shoulders after that. It would probably add another ten years in the pen for him, or, like the Boomer's trooper in Montana Territory, he would hang for it. His spirit ebbed, and he knew now this brief taste of free air couldn't last. "Try and get him back on his feet, Shannon," he said, soberly.

"What are you going to do, Larch?"

He started moving. "I'll make out," he told her, touching her hands again for a brief instant. "I'll make out, and I—I want you to forget me." Then he hurried away.

HE STARTED for the gate again, but decided against it, and headed for the stables. He didn't know exactly what to do. He could probably find a good hiding place somewhere, but he knew the place would be turned upside down as soon as Lieutenant Torrence came to. He heard a mumble of voices ahead of him, and pulled up. Two men were loading a wagon with duffle, and they were talking about the prison break. They already knew six men had tried to escape, and that two had been shot down before they got over the wall. They knew the name of one of them—Froleg Johnson.

"I hope Reegan and the Boomer are in on it," the talk went on. "That damn' Hume's a no-good pinnin' it on them so hard. You can't tell, maybe you and I would've done the same thing if we'd been out there. I'm glad the sucker's pullin' out."

"I wish he'd load his own damn' truck,"

the other muttered. "That chest I heaved up there weighs a ton."

Larch listened for some time. Apparently, Hume was loading his duffle on a supply wagon to take it across to the depot in the morning where it would be taken aboard a down-river boat. He had left the chore to the two men when he heard the gun-fire on Prison Hill.

Larch waited until the two men went away. He had half a notion he might stow away in the duffle, and possibly get out of the fort and aboard the boat in the morning. He climbed the wagon, and looked it over. There was a big wooden chest, and a number of loose items a man might gather when he stayed long in one place. The chest had a new padlock, and it was locked. The load looked too scanty to make a hiding place, even in the dark, and he gave up the idea.

He remembered the trooper's complaint about the weight of the chest, and took hold of the handle, and hefted it. He could hardly budge the big box, and he wondered what a man might have that weighed so much. The box itself was solidly built, and it looked like it might be a sailor's sea chest, but the size of it would hardly account for all the weight.

Different ideas rattled around in his mind, building up into a notion he ought to break in, and have a look. He had nothing definite to work on, because Cy Shone's letters had been pure surmises, one of them, in fact, according to Shannon, an outright fake. There was nothing to tie the sergeant in with Bascombe, and nothing to tie Bascombe in with the looting of the supply depot. Quite the contrary. There was definite proof that the robbery had occurred after Bascombe's wagons had started out on the long trip to Camp Grant. But it could have been planted proof, to throw the blame on Cap Baroneer, who had threatened to do that very thing ever since the cash had been held back. And when Baroneer got that

fake letter he had believed it implicitly. He hadn't been putting on an act. He thought the letter proved what had been his belief from the start. It was hardly enough to build any hopes on, but it was worth a try.

He examined the lock. The staple looked solid, and he figured it was bolted fast on the inside. He found a tapered iron pin in the wagon reach, for trailer use, and he managed to force it part way through the staple, far enough so he could put on some hard pressure. The staple bent, but it didn't let go. He worked it back and forth for some time. Finally, with a loud noise, it snapped in two, and he got the lid up. There wasn't as much inside as he had expected. In one section there were small compartments where he found a hand gun, carefully wrapped in flannel, and some ammunition. He pulled out some old work clothes, but before he could see what was under them, he heard somebody coming toward him, and slid off the far side of the wagon.

He kept the gun, and managed to get it partly loaded before the two men came in so close he couldn't afford to risk any more noise. This time it was Sergeant Hume, and Fig Bascombe. Bascombe was in a stew, and had come across the river to give Hume the news. He claimed Cy Shone had engineered the prison break, and he knew that Larch Regan had escaped.

"That don't worry me any," Sergeant Hume blustered. "Hell, some Injun'll fetch him in for bounty before he's a day older. What d'you worry about him for?"

"Tain't worry, Sarge, just nerves," Bascombe muttered sourly. "There's another thing—a couple buzzards just got back to Yuma, and I seen 'em talking to Cy Shone. Their names is Barnacle Papp and Ferd Liefer. They used to work for Cap Baroneer. They come offn the desert, and they looked purty tough, like they been on a long pasear."

"What of it? We got our tracks covered, ain't we?"

"It puts me in a sweat anyway."

"They'll never pin anything on us. We planted that hold-up on Baroneer good and proper, and they got him in the pen. Nobody's goin' to dig around in that again. For all anybody knows, that hold-up happened after we pulled out, and that's the way it'll stay."

"S'pose them two jaspers found where we planted my two swampers and your two troopers? Sand blows around, you know."

"For God's Sake!" Sergeant Hume exploded. "You gonna bellyache forever?"

THERE was a lengthy silence. Then Bascombe spoke again. "You sure there ain't goin' to be trouble gettin' that stuff out of here?"

"No, I ain't sure," Hume growled, irritable. "How can I be sure? I got it loaded. If you can keep your trap shut long enough I'll make out okay. I don't know why you had to come over here in the first place."

"I'm nervous, Sarge. I'm a nervous wreck."

Larch heard it all, and it was exactly what he had been wracking his brains to put together ever since the long-ago night he had made the play that landed him, and the Boomer, on Prison Hill. Bascombe and Hume had looted the quartermaster's depot. They had planted the theft on Cap Baroneer. They had murdered the swampers and Will Peabody and Orlie Fitch. Cy Shone was right, whether his letter to Baroneer was faked, or not. And Larch, too, had been on the right track all the time. His hunch about finding the missing cash in the chest was right, too,—right, but a little late.

Hume and Bascombe let their worries gnaw at them. Larch stayed down along the rear wheel on the far side, waiting for them to talk themselves out so he could

finish what he had started, hoping they would notice the raised lid. In spite of his bluster, Hume was just as worried as Bascombe. Both men planned to take the down-river boat. Both were going to San Francisco by steamer. There was long silence between them. Several times Bascombe remarked that he better get back to Yuma, but he didn't make a move to go. Then, cursing suddenly, Hume climbed up on the wagon.

"Goddlemighty," he exploded. "Look here."

Bascombe climbed aboard, and started cursing, too.

"Shut up," Hume rasped. "You want to wake the dead?"

"Is it gone?"

"How in hell would I know?"

"Well, find out."

Larch straightened up alongside the wheel.

Hume whirled. "Oh—uh—Lieutenant," he stuttered, apparently catching a glint of light from somewhere on the bars Larch wore. "I—I'm just checking my stuff here on the wagon. It's all right, sir. I'll be finished in a minute."

"Not Lieutenant," Larch answered. "Regan!"

Bascombe stumbled over some duffle, and swore. Hume's breath rasped in his throat. Larch didn't move. He could see the end of the long trail he had taken, but he hadn't quite reached it. Hume could still cover his snaky tracks, with hot lead, before Larch could get in a word to anybody. And he would probably collect some bounty money to boot. Hume knew as much, and tried it. His gun blasted, point-blank, but Larch moved before he got off his shot, and the bullet never touched him. Bascombe fired, too, in a sudden drum-roll that slashed through the night like thunder. Like thunder, too, it was all sound and fury. Lead didn't touch Larch.

He was dubious about the gun in his hand. It was coated with grease, and he

had managed to get only three cartridges into the cylinder. It didn't give him much leeway. But he had one advantage. Crouched down the way he was, the two men, perched on the wagon box, made fair targets against the sky. He took careful aim, and fired.

Bascombe screeched, and went to his knees. He stayed that way for some time, sputtering and gagging and cursing, and then he lurched suddenly, and toppled sideways off the wagon. He didn't make another sound after that.

Hume finally had sense enough to jump down. Larch stayed close to the ground, shifting fast, trying to keep Hume outlined against the faint light that came from the barracks, and the lanterns at the gate. He heard some commotion behind him, but he didn't let it throw him off.

He missed his second shot, and a bullet scorched his leg, curling his toes with a sudden cramp, and sending a stab of pain up the other way. But it didn't knock him down, and he would have sworn the final shot he made was good. He had the feel in his bones it was dead center, but Hume didn't go down, and Larch had to take time to get another cartridge into his gun. Time he couldn't spare, because Hume needed only one good shot to end things.

But the next shot didn't come from Hume. It came from the side. He saw several men closing in on him. One of them was Lieutenant Torrence. It was his gun that finally brought Larch down.

CY SHONE'S letter to Cap Baroneer had been a fake, but Cy's guesses had come close to the truth. Barnacle Papp and Ferd Liefer, the two salt-water desert rats, had found Bascombe's wagons, and a blow had uncovered the bodies of the two breed swampers and Hume's two troopers, all four of them shot in the back at close range. It pleased Barnacle, especially, because they hadn't had to do a lick of work to uncover proof of Sergeant Hume's

sorry treachery. What they found opened prison doors for the Boomer and Cap Baroneer.

Baroneer came out on a stretcher, but he came out with eyes hot and peppery as ever, bound and determined to start another lawsuit against the government for false imprisonment. He was talking million-dollar lawsuits. The Boomer was more modest, wondering if he was going to get his pay for the time he had spent in the pen.

Except for five hundred dollars that Hume and Bascombe had frittered away, the currency and gold was found intact in Hume's sea-chest.

Larch Regan was the only one who didn't know all this. He didn't know that that last shot of his had been good, and that Hume was dead before anyone got to him. In fact, Fig Bascombe survived him, at least long enough to tell the whole sordid tale. Larch spent his time in a half-world of shadows, and vague uncertainties, of darkness and light that was only half of each, and hung like a gray cloud over him, night and day.

Lieutenant Torrence's shot had struck him in the shoulder, then glanced up, and plowed its way across the back of his neck. For a long time he hovered between life and death. Shannon watched over him, day and night, holding his hand in hers, as if she could somehow give him some of her own strength, watching his thin, spent breath, holding off death as if she had it in her hands to do. Even Lieutenant Torrence took a turn at the chore, because he was good at it, and he owed Larch a lot for clearing his record at the supply depot of such a bad blot. The Boomer came whenever he had a moment, and stood silently watching Larch's face, and he would stay until his time was gone, wordless, stricken. Even Major Shafter came and went, deeply concerned, and he was there when at last it was over, and Larch

opened his eyes, rational and clear for the first time since that night he had shot it out with Hume and Bascombe.

Larch didn't know all this had passed. He figured probably the night had gone by, and it was morning again. "Did Sergeant Hume pull out already?" he asked.

"Yes," Major Shafter said, a little wryly, "he's gone all right."

"And Bascombe?"

"Yes. Bascombe, too. That's a month ago, Regan."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"That's a long time." Too long, he knew, to put all the little odds and ends in his mind together, and make a convincing story.

"How would you like to stay right here?" Major Shafter asked. "As a commissioned officer?"

"That would be all right," Larch said, managing a grin, because he figured it was the major's way of torturing him, punishing him for what he had done.

"You've shown you can think straight, and finish what you set out to do. We need men like that."

"Oh, stop it," Larch cried with sudden bitterness, and twisted to the wall.

"I'll send Shannon over," the Major said, and went out.

Shannon finally convinced him that he had been on his back a long time, and brought him up to date. She said Cy Shone had gotten an outfit together, and had taken over Bascombe's hauling contract. He had gone now, with supplies for Camp Grant, and meant to fetch back the two troopers who had done what they thought was right, and found it wrong. She took his hand, and he watched her talk, knowing in his mind that she had sat there that way every day that had passed, without him doing anything about it.

"Lord Sake," he breathed, finally. "I got a lot to catch up with."

FIRST KILL

By John Jo
Carpenter



Art dipped for his gun as the hard-case fell back in the door.

OLD Jesse Almer signalled from afar, and Art Worth pulled up his horse and waited for him. Jesse had been working on his windmill; or that might just be an excuse, maybe he had really been waiting for Art Worth. He came over from the well, about two hundred yards, and picked his way swearing through the barb-wire fence.

"Hello, Art," he said. "Going to drop in and see Bernice?"

Art nodded and said, "Thought I would. Jesse, I just bought Harvey Travers' little place over on Sickie creek. It will be a relief not to have to live in a hotel any more."

When that trusting cowpoke, Art Worth, saw the gunmen shoot down his best friend in cold blood, he lit out on the lonely, twisting trail that would only end with a bushwhack grave, dug by the blood-stained hands of the man he loved.

"I 'magine it will," Jesse said.

They liked each other and always had, these two, and yet somehow it seemed Jesse found it hard to meet Art's eyes. He leaned against a fence post and picked at it with his gnarled old hands. He cleared his throat harshly.

"You and Kip Apperson, you still room together, I reckon," he said, and Art

nodded. Jesse went on, "I wouldn't bother none to stop and see Bernice, Art," and Art shifted uneasily in the saddle and wondered suddenly why he had found such pleasure in owning the Travers place. There was no thrill in it now.

"You think she's made up her mind to Kip?"

"I know she has, Art," Jesse said, meeting his eyes at last. "Wisht you'd learned it before you bought that place. I don't see why Kip didn't say something."

"Kip's out of town the last few days. So was I, over on the Hades mesa; grass is short there. Why Jesse, it won't do no harm to see Bernice. Kip's my best friend. Reckon she'd rather I heard it from her or him anyway."

"All right, Art." Old Jesse's mouth straightened angrily and he hammered the top of the post. "I wish it was you, Art! That's all I've got to say."

"Well, somebody has to lose when there's two," Art said. "See you."

HE TOUCHED the horse with his heels and rode on down the lane. He had no desire to see Bernice now. Once she had been his girl, all his, while Kip had a girl over at Paisano Crossing. Then Kip's girl married somebody else and Kip came honestly to Art and said, "Are you dead serious about Bernice? If you are—" Art had answered, "How can I be serious about anybody? I'm lucky I've got pants with no holes in them. Did you have ideas in that direction?" Kip had nodded seriously, perhaps the first really serious moment Art had ever seen in him. That's how it started.

He rounded the turn in the trail and the Almer House came into view, set in a live-oak grove in the middle of a scalding, rolling sea of brown grass. A horse whinnied at him as he rode into the grove, and Bernice came to the door. All of her friends her own age were married by now, but her single status seemed to cause her

no worry. She was twenty-one and looked seventeen, which was more than some of her friends could say. Short and roundly constructed, with a heavy head of yellow hair and unexpectedly dark eyes and brows, she was all thoroughbred, and would not age.

Art said, "Hi, Yellertop," and she said, "Hello, Art," in the old way, but he caught the difference. She had come out to hang out a damp dish cloth. She stretched it carefully over a string by the door and he slouched in the saddle and felt sorry for her because the words came so hard.

"Hear you've got something to tell me, Yellertop," he said, and she turned swiftly and put her hands behind her, flushing deeply.

"I guess I have, Art. It's crazy, as long as I—well, as I've been crazy about you—" She swallowed and went on with determination, "I guess you know I was, Art, and somehow it seems like I still am. Only Kip—only when Kip—"

"I know." He nodded and fished for cigaret makings, and his hand trembled and spilled tobacco as he rolled one. "Well, Bernice, you know what I'm going to say. I just hope you and Kip will be—*oh, Bernice!*"

She started swiftly off the step toward him and he whirled his horse and rode away, not looking back. Old Jesse had started back to the windmill, but he turned and came to meet Art.

"That didn't take long," he said.

"Not very."

"You said Kip was out of town. I thought he went back to work for Pat McGill."

"He did," Art said. "Pat shipped some beeves to Fresno last week and Kip drove him down Thursday to collect for them. You know old Pat's legs have give out completely on him. Kip almost has to tote him back and forth."

"Oh!" Jesse seemed relieved. "There's

a scare-brain if I ever see one, and when you said he was out of town I figgered he'd blew his job again. Bernice has got a lot of sense and I never did pull a very tight line on her, but I guess I'd put my foot down if Kip was dealing cards again."

"Kip has settled down lately."

Jesse snorted, and as Art gathered the reins in his hands again the old man said slowly, "You know, mebbe your trouble is you're *too* steady. Bernice has got middlin' good sense but all women is subject to faintin' fits in their judgment. A woman would ruther have the flower than the cow that et it, even with beef three-sixty a hundred. You and Kip—"

Art was relieved to find he could laugh. He said, "Jesse, you didn't collect that kind of wisdom setting with your sock feet by the kitchen stove. That's pretty wild talk for a married man." They grinned at each other, understanding each other, and then Art rode back to the stage road and headed for Apperson.

HE and Kip had the front, upper, corner room in the California House, facing the town's principal street. The town had been founded by Kip's grandfather and named for him, and there were two buildings, the only brick ones, that still had the Apperson name carved over the door. But they were no longer in Apperson hands; what Kip's father had not squandered in the Los Angeles dives along Ferguson Alley and Alameda Street, Kip himself had let slip through his hands.

But in justice to Kip, it was always recognized that there was very little left by the time he got his hands on it. His mother had been the daughter of a small rancher with whom Pearl had eloped and then abandoned. She died early; Kip could not remember her, nor the time when his grandfather abdicated all responsibility by tagging him like a package and shipping him by stage to Pearl Apperson.

There were always women around in the

places where Pearl brought up his son, and from them Kip had learned manners, and a way of speaking that both men and women found interesting. He could dress well on very little money. He had the wits to make a little now and then, and hard, frugal old Pat McGill called him the best judge of cattle he had ever seen.

So far only three persons had pinned much faith in Kip, and in his twenty-fifth year he could count on the loyalty only of Pat McGill, who had fired him five times and hired him back five, Bernice Almer, and Art Worth.

THE room was stuffy and hot, and lonely as a jail cell, when Art clumped into it at six-thirty that evening. He threw up the windows and looked down on the busy street, wondering where his appetite for supper had gone. He had eaten well at Travers' place that morning; nothing since. He slumped down in a chair and watched men streaming into the hotel to go to dinner. The hitch rail was full, and across the street the livery stable had horses tied in clear to the front door.

Looks like a copious Saturday night, he thought. *Cut to Kip's measure*. But Kip of course was an engaged man, and the tiger would be unmolested and unbucked by him tonight. Art glanced at the picture on the battered old dresser. The photographer had not done too well with Bernice, but he had made up for it by working her initials into the emulsion on the tin. It was Art's picture, but his in a different way now. An old saying of his mother's, forgotten until this moment, ran through his mind:

*Change the name but not the letter,
Change for worse instead of better!*

Something like that must have been in old Jesse Almer's mind as he brooded on the future of Bernice Almer as Bernice Apperson.

"Oh, hell!" Art said.

There were a lot of strangers in town. It was getting on toward fall, and a few ranches were hiring already. Art himself would be hiring a man or two next fall at this time—. He swore again and got up and went over to the dresser and yanked open the top drawer, which he and Kip shared.

Both of them kept their shaving kits here, and a strop hung from a nail on each side of the dresser. He rubbed his cheek and decided not to bother after all. On Kip's side of the drawer there was a half-filled quart bottle of good whiskey, and a silver-mounted forty-five that had been Pearl Apperson's. Kip treasured it, and the hand-tooled belt and holster he kept it in. Old Pearl had fancied himself as a quick-draw man until, in Kip's sixteenth year, someone called his bluff.

With that in mind, Kip had not tried to be a quick-draw artist, but he had learned to shoot the handsome gun until, in his hands and at his maximum range, it had the unerring accuracy of a rifle. It was a good gun, the best of guns, and Kip was the best of men with it.

Art picked up the bottle and drank deeply. He had never been able to afford good whiskey and had not cultivated a taste for it. What little he drank was in the five-cent blends. He was not automatically released from the need for being a sober, steady, saving man. He had the Travers place and a little left over. He took another drink and turned Bernice's picture around so that it faced the other side of the street.

"I might as well get washed up," he said, "but I'll just take this along, for of a certainty Kip won't need it any more."

His tongue was a little furry but his head was clear. He put the bottle in his pocket and went over to the window to close it, a customary precaution in the dusty season. The first light went on in Drewry's casino across the street just then, and as Art paused with his hands on the

upraised sash a black top buggy wheeled up in front of Drewry's.

"All hail, pilgrims, and come wet your whistles! Old Pat McGill's in town and dyin' to buy!" came Kip's stentorian voice.

Art saw Kip leap down lithely and tie Pat's high-stepping buggy team. The old rancher waited in the buggy seat, grinning happily, for Kip to come lift him down. Kip tied the team and went back to the buggy and had his hand on Pat's arm when two men came out of the casino.

One of them went to one side of the buggy and the other went to the other side of the buggy, and as they stepped off the curb both men drew guns. The one on Kip's side rammed his into Kip's back and the other one kept his handy in his left hand while he reached under old Pat's feet for the black satchel that lay there.

Art remembered Pat's distrust of banks and drafts, and his passion for hard money. He remembered Kip's gun in the drawer and he let out a yell and lumbered over to the dresser after it. He saw the man raise the gun and clip Pat McGill over the side of the head with it. The old rancher might have had useless legs, but his fists were as big and stony as ever and he had his old capacity for rage. He choked off a bawl in the middle and pitched forward into Kip's arms when the gun hit him.

Someone must have come out of the hotel, for one of the gunmen turned and told him calmly, "Just stay where you are and nobody will get hurt, but don't get any funny ideas." Art heard this as he jerked at the dresser drawer, but he had closed it crookedly and it stuck. He put his foot against it and yanked again, and the bottle in his pocket stretched his pants too tight and he cursed savagely and threw it across the room and put his foot up and yanked again.

The drawer came out. He fell backwards and their razors went sliding. He picked up the gun, shook off the holster

and belt, and scrambled toward the window.

Kip was down over old Pat now, and the two men had gone into the livery stable. They came out leading two good horses. One of them, carrying the satchel, swung up into the saddle and the other handed him his reins. Then he went over and leaned down and put his gun against Kip's head and fired.

ALL of the whiskey dizziness went out of Art then. He laid the handsome gun along the window sill and fired, and he saw the man who had killed Kip jerk and sit down. Both horses went up in the air, and the buggy team shied away and shied back again on the end of their tie-straps, and one of them stepped twice on the gunman's foot. He swayed there a moment, trying with both hands to pick up the gun, and then he fell over on his side and his ballooning shirt suddenly spilled a lot of blood.

The other man kicked the extra horse away and pulled his own up on its hind legs and swung it around. He ran his left hand through the handles of the satchel and held the horse with that hand, and over his arm he trained his gun. Art took his time, and he felt two slugs smash into the thin, dry sill beside him. One hit a stud and stuck there; the other bit through, and scored his arm from elbow to shoulder.

He pulled the trigger as the horse came

down and bunched its whole body for the explosive getaway. He waited as a man waits with a shotgun for birds to rise into his range. He knew he hit him. The rider reeled in the saddle and the horse ran wild and spraddle-legged, belly to the ground and eyes rolling. It was a sorrel with a blaze face; a horse that would be recognized anywhere.

Art started over the window sill, and then he remembered Bernice and the empty chambers in the gun, and the holster and ammunition in the middle of the floor. He stepped on his own razor and broke it as he scooped up bright brass cartridges, and Bernice's fallen picture went skittering across the floor. He ran downstairs, buckling the belt around him as he ran. A crowd had already gathered around the three bodies. They were all dead.

"Smashed old Pat's temple vein," someone stammered in an awed voice. "An' there wasn't no use to kill Kip! He swung down on him with the flat of that gun and knocked him down while he was heftin' down old Pat, and then after the job is done he comes back and kills him. There wasn't no use to do that!"

Apperson had seen dead men before, and not too long back, either, but it was the cruel, cold-bloodedness of Kip's murder that stunned them. Until then, it was just another bold, smart, well-thought-out stickup, one of the best, in fact. Until then, a man could almost admire the two

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nervy ones, could almost say, "Well, if they got the nerve I reckon they got the right, is the way I look at it." It was the needless slaughter of Kip, that last senseless bullet through a fallen man's head, that shattered the pattern of risk-makes-right.

The one Art had killed was about forty-five, a muscular, black-haired man with a surprisingly good face. Here was no half-witted ne'er-do-well, but a man with brains, perhaps brains gone wrong, but still there. Art looked at him and tried to buck up his own nerve by thinking of Bernice, but his mind went around and around: *I killed him. I let out that blood. Why, I killed a man, and God, how I need a drink!*

Somebody said, "That was good shoot-in', Art. I'm a son of a gun if you didn't use your head!" The air cleared a little, and once again he could connect the bleeding, gaping, open-mouthed, pitifully dead man with the one who had stooped over Kip and deliberately shot him. He nodded.

"I think I winged the other one, too. What are we waitin' for? Let's go after him!"

There was a rush for the hitch rail across the street, for the livery stable on their side. His own horse was tired, and it was a little, wise, well-trained cowpony of uncertain years anyway. He helped himself to a raw-boned, jug-headed bay gelding that was the liveryman's private mount and favorite possession, and while he was fighting to keep his seat in the saddle the owner came running out.

"Beat his fool head off with your hat! Knock his brains out with your hat, Art!" the man yelled, and Art fanned the gelding's ears with his hat and it quit bucking and he was relieved that it was all right to take the horse. "He cut west toward Morondo Mesa, Art—I seen him swing off the stage road—try the old cabin up there—"

"Sure thing," Art yelled.

He got away first and gave the bay gelding its head until the Morondo cutoff swept toward them. Behind, it seemed that half the town had fanned out; at least thirty horses were pounding along, their riders whooping for him to slow down. He shook his head, and Bernice's troubled face and still-happy eyes came back to him, and he hoped they would break it to her gently and not say anything that would conjure up the picture Kip had made.

"Morondo!" he said. "My luck's in. Run, you fool—I know Morondo like I know my face in the shaving mirror."

Morondo means "bald" in the Spanish language. The mesa had gone vacant for decades, and only recently had the high price of cattle made it profitable to work the treeless maze of brush. For the plateau was bald only from a distance. When a man got into it he found it a desert of harsh, brittle, spiny cactus and sage and dwarf greasewood. Feed was scant here, but they brought out almost a thousand cattle every year lately—lean, tough brutes well able to care for themselves, for only the hardest sought pasture here.

In the old days it had been a good hunting place. Art had learned there were occasional deer here when he was eleven, the year his father died and all kinds of food were scarce in the house. By the time he was fifteen he knew every path and trail through the great, dry table land, and where the deer, lean, wary, hard-pressed creatures that they soon became, could be found.

He and Kip Apperson had hunted this together, camping out here with only a canteen and a few dry biscuits many a time when one day failed to bring in a deer. There had been a few occasions, early in their partnership, when they were trying to raise barley for old Pat McGill, that a carcass of venison was the most important thing in the world. Times were

hard then. The barley venture failed—neither Art nor Kip was cut out to be a farmer, anyway. Bernice was a gawky pigtailed kid then.

And so for a moment it seemed to him that Kip was breezing along beside him, and they were heading for the old prospector's shanty on the other side of Morondo. When the prospector built the place, laboriously hauling in cottonwood slabwood, Apperson was too far away for trading purposes, since the mesa was then thought to be too difficult a passage. The prospector had done his trading out the other side, where it was a five-mile hike to the Dry Wells road, where the wells were dry only a few weeks each year.

The fool, Art thought.

The stickup men were smart in their way. From somewhere, they had picked up enough local knowledge for them to plan the job. They had learned about McGill's sale of cattle and his hard-money habit. They had learned about the shanty, and the Dry Wells road, now little used. They had learned a way through Morondo Mesa, or had learned that the last few years of grazing there had cut a number of well-defined trails through it.

THERE was a big, hollow-looking moon over his shoulder when the bay gelding carried him into the maze of brush. Now and then he leaned over the horse's shoulder, seeking sign, and not finding any but riding on anyway. There was only one place the man could go with any hope of escape, wounded as he was. That was the cabin. If he got lost, if he went elsewhere, the mesa would hold him until they could collect him at leisure tomorrow, by daylight.

He lost the other possemen quickly, because none of them knew the mesa like he did, none of them was riding a horse like his. Wild cattle broke out of his way, snorting and crashing off through the brush and cutting new paths as they had

been doing for several years. The bay tripped once in a crossing of trails and slipped down, and Art slacked the reins and kicked away the stirrups and dropped to the ground.

It was there that he saw the first sign of the man he was chasing. He had stopped here and dismounted, and Art knew why. He had come a long way with a bullet hole in him, and however small it was it needed more attention than he could give it while riding. Probably he had torn off his shirt tail and plugged the hole. While his own horse got up and shook itself peevishly, as though ashamed for having fallen, Art studied the sign with satisfaction.

"Heading for the shanty sure enough," he murmured. "But where does that take him? Surely didn't figure to hole up there, so there must be fresh horses there. Wouldn't dare to go out on that blaze-face sorrel anyhow. *What horses?* Drifters don't have more than one apiece. They'd have to be all set to get out on the Dry Wells road fast. I'm missing something in this."

He got back on his horse, and because Bernice was never far from his mind he shook his head and pushed back the thought that kept coming toward the front. Of course he himself had been out of town for several days and could not have seen the two strangers, had they been in town. But in a couple of days they had learned too much and the plans had been worked out too well.

He pushed the horse ahead, holding it down to a steady, ground-gaining run, shaking his head and trying to throw out the picture of how Kip had looked, sprawled over Pat McGill's body, and what Bernice's eyes would show when she heard about it. He could see the cabin a long time before he reached it, a little square, gray cube with a blackly gaping, open door, and he pulled the bay down and studied it.

There was no sign of the man, but when he rode ahead a little a horse showed itself briefly and then vanished in the brush beside the cabin. It was a black horse and a good one, and it was impatiently wheeling on the end of a thirty-foot stake rope. As he approached he made out another horse, and then suddenly he saw the blaze-faced sorrel. It was running free, without saddle or bridle. It fought with a horse Art could not see and then came out and rolled in the dirt in front of the cabin and got up and trotted off into the brush.

Art got down and tied the bay a little way off the trail and went forward on foot. The sorrel came to meet him, and he almost got his hand on it before it swung away into the brush. Its brand was a strange one, as he had expected, but a little farther on he suddenly came upon a dark bay horse tangled in its own stake rope. The wounded gunman had not had time to stop and free it.

Art untied the knot and held the horse by its mane while he untangled the loops around its legs. His skin prickled as he recognized its Bar-M brand. He coiled the rope and tossed it out of the way and jabbed the horse in the flank with his thumb. It snorted and smashed away through the brush and the last he saw of it, it was running hard, head high, to the south.

"McGill's brand," he said. "I'm not missing anything now. I never really missed anything. I just wanted to."

He slid the gun out of its holster and checked it carefully, and for the first time he noticed the dull burn on his left arm, where the slug had scored him. He flexed the arm and held it stiff and tried balancing the gun across it, the way the gunman had done. It hurt, but it felt right, so he shoved the gun in his pocket and kept his hand on it as he walked on up the path.

The black horse came out from behind the shanty and blew soft alarm at him. He stopped about thirty feet away and yelled,

"Hey, inside there." Nothing happened. He rubbed his sore arm tenderly with the tips of his fingers and yelled again, "Hey, inside there. Come out if you want to stay healthy."

He let it hang that way, and in a moment the man came to the door. He had stripped down to his waist, and around his belly he had wound a collection of rags and pieces of towels and shirts. Art's slug had hit him low in the right side, not necessarily a fatal wound, but one that could lose him a lot of blood. He was a powerfully built man who could stand to lose some—but not too much, not as much as he would have lost had the cabin been a mile farther.

His hands came up slowly and he said, "You don't need to shoot, mister. I know when I'm licked. But I didn't kill nobody. That was Harry's idea and it served him right he got killed."

"Well he sure did," Art said.

He lifted Kip's gun out and tossed it in his palm and dropped it back into its holster. The man sighed with relief.

"I'll take my time in the pen," he moaned, "and you won't hear me holler. I didn't go for killin' nobody. I got the money right here and I'm glad you run me down. I bled bad—"

He stopped uncertainly and let his arms down a little. His face was gray and ghastly; Art remembered, with sudden, sickening sharpness, the face of Harry, who now had a name, whom Art had killed, whose body heat had not yet all vanished. He swallowed twice and said Bernice's name twice, and it brought back her face to his mind. His mouth went sidewise and his throat felt tight.

"Maybe you did and maybe you didn't aim to kill him," he said. "I don't care much. Kip fixed it up, didn't he? Kip told you about McGill's money, and about the cabin. He brought McGill's horses up here for the getaway, didn't he? You were just supposed to tap him on the head,

easy-like. But it splits better two ways than three, don't it? You don't need Kip after he sang out that *'Hail, pilgrims.'* That's about the size of it, ain't it?"

The man licked his lips and said, "Now you're talkin' about the way Harry thought, and not me. Mister, they rung me in on it last. Harry didn't tell nobody much. I'll take my time in the pen, I said."

"No you won't," Art told him, taking a step forward. "Don't you see—Kip was my friend, and somebody else's friend, and you're the only person in the world outside of me that knows he was in on it. Are you going to go for a gun, fella, or am I going to have to kill you as you stand there?"

The big jaw dropped, the powerful face twisted piteously, the trembling arms groped for the door. Then Art took a step forward and lifted his left arm in front of him and reached for the gun. The man tumbled backwards, scrambling for his gun, and came up with it blazing. The darkness of the cabin swallowed him, but it was a small door and there was only one place to shoot.

IT WAS three days after Kip's funeral before he could bring himself to go down to the Travers place. He went into the little two-room house and sat down wearily and looked around.

He heard horses outside. He went to the door and saw Jesse and Bernice Ahmer

riding toward him, and sight of the girl, whom he had not seen since Kip's funeral made the little house seem hateful. Once he had planned to fix it up for her, but too much had happened in the meantime.

Jesse called, "Understood you were down here. Bernice wants to talk to you, Art. Give it to her plain and straight, will you?" But over the girl's shoulder, as she dismounted and came running toward him, Art caught a terrible, agonized pleading in old Jesse's eyes.

"Art, tell me the truth!" Bernice stopped less than two feet away from him. He could smell her hair, and under her blazing gaze he went weak. "Tell me the truth! There's a whisper around Apperson that Kip himself was part of the gang. Is that true? And if you lie to me, Art—"

He said easily, "Bernice, now when did I ever lie to you? Yes, I heard the story, too."

"Didn't—didn't that man, the last one—didn't he say anything that would tell you one way or the other?"

"What he said," Art lied deliberately and calmly, "is something that I can't say in front of you, but I'll say this—I hope to the Lord I've got different language in my mouth when my time comes."

She leaned against him and cried, and he put his arms around her and thought, *Women are the cruelest damn animals in the world. Cries in my arms about a fella that—you talk about mountain lions!*

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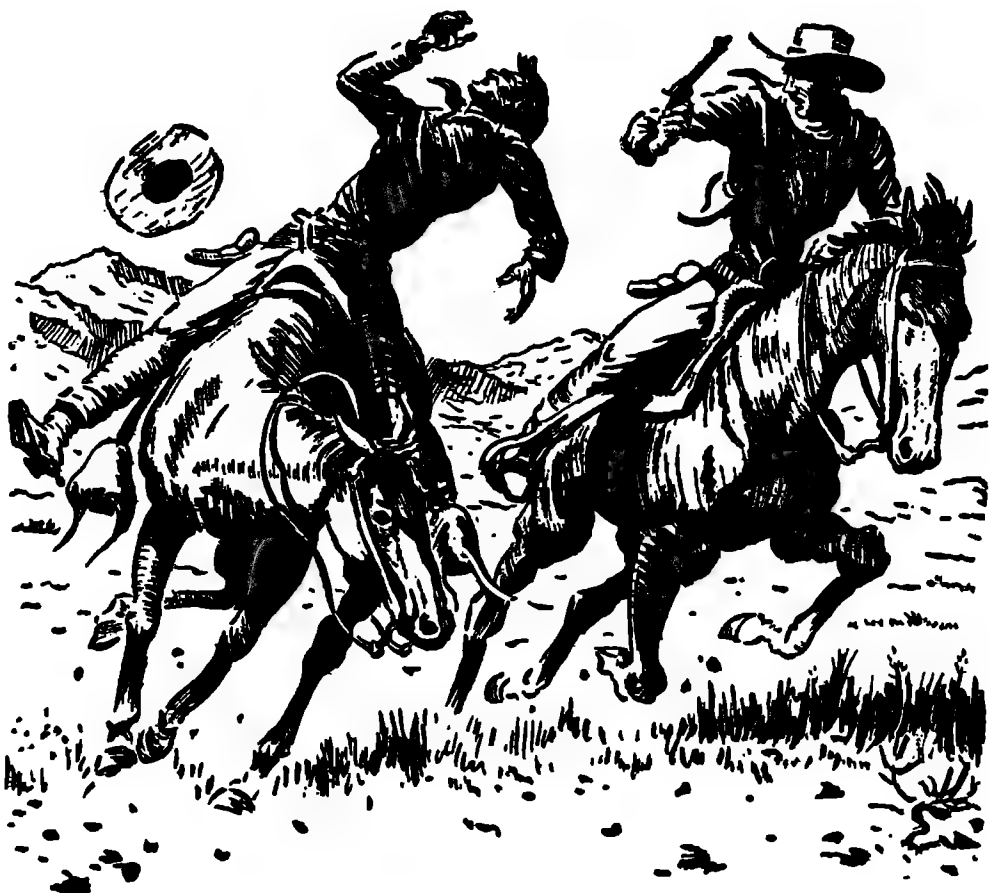


SIGN ON DEAD

Action-Packed Saga of
the West

By
James Shaffer

That bust-head grub-liner, Barney Patton, felt the old itch crawling over him again when the two riders stopped him on the trail. The only medicine, Barney figured, was a dose of Col. Colt's tonic—which, unfortunately, must be administered with Barney smack in the middle of a ruthless, bushwhack range war!



MAN'S RANCH!

CHAPTER ONE

Trail Crossing Polecat

BARNEY felt the old itch start crawling over him again when the two riders stopped him on the trail. It was about dusk, and Barney was riding toward the lights of a ranchhouse in the distance. Barney figured he'd get a meal at the ranch, and maybe a bunk to spread his soogans.

It was just the fact that the two riders

stopped him on the trail that caused that old itch to show up again. It was the way they stopped him. He wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to his surroundings; in fact, he was thinking that he could already smell the supper cooking, down at that ranchhouse.

It was then that the two riders showed up. They just rode in on him from both sides; suddenly appearing from the brush that bordered the trail.

"Going some-eres?" the man on Barney's right asked. There was a Winchester

One of the hardcases was spilled from his saddle by the rifle fire.



held carelessly in the crook of his arm. But not *too* carelessly. The muzzle of it pointed to Barney's empty belly.

The old itch made a wriggle along Barney's skin. But not too much; just enough to make him shift around in the saddle. He eyed the Winchester and decided to give the man a prompt answer.

"Figgered on picking up a meal and a bunk at that ranch down below," he said truthfully. The ranch in question was situated in a long, shallow basin. Barney's meeting with the two riders took place on the rim of the low foothills surrounding the basin.

"Trying to make out like a grub line rider, huh?" the man on Barney's left grunted. This gent didn't cotton to long guns. He had a sixshooter in his hand. The light was growing bad, but Barney squinted hard and noticed that the sixshooter was cocked. That old itch became more pronounced. Barney scratched his leg; hipped himself around in the saddle and scratched the seat of his pants. The itch was spreading.

"They pass a law against riding grub line?" he asked innocently.

The gent with the long gun didn't answer that. He jerked his head to his companion.

"Shake out that bedroll, Stud," he ordered. "See if he's carrying anything besides fleas in them blankets. Stud obeyed. He carried out the order with one hand, and held on to that cocked sixshooter with the other.

"Nothing in his bedroll, Sam," Stud reported. He didn't roll the blankets back up neat and tie them behind Barney's saddle the way he'd found them. He just flung 'em on the ground. Barney scratched his right shoulder, and scrubbed his left ear. Sam, the long gun man, kned his horse close to Barney and lifted Barney's own sixgun. He smelled it, and then worked the ejecter. He laughed.

"This thing was fired about a month

ago. He didn't even clean it, or jack the empties out."

That's right, Barney thought. Was hoping that I wouldn't be using that gun no more. I was hoping that last trouble I got into cured me of that old itch. He sighed and scratched the back of his neck. If you gents, he thought to himself woe-fully, hadn't been so durn snotty about this thing, the itch wouldn't of come back, and I could of turned around and rode the other way. But you were too durn sassy. Now I got the itch again, and it's too late to turn back.

No, Barney concluded, he wasn't going to turn back. He was going to ride down to that ranch for supper. And if these two gents tried to stop him—he sighed, scratched his belly button and thought of the little Derringer tucked in his boot top.

"What the hell you scratching about?" Sam demanded.

"Chiggers, I guess," Barney said lamely. It wouldn't do any good to try to explain to these two. It had never done no good to try to explain to nobody. He'd tried it. To sheriffs, to judges, to all kinds of folks. He'd tried to explain why he didn't run around and ride the other way when he ran into something like this. Other men did. Sensible men.

When they saw trouble, the kind of trouble that wasn't none of their durn business, they lit out in the opposite direction. Barney had tried that, and he'd gone crazy with the itch, till he'd ridden back and jumped into the middle of things with both feet.

"What'll we do?" Stud asked. "He ain't nothing but a grub liner, that's certain."

Sam laughed. Barney was beginning to dislike that laugh. And he wasn't feeling any too kindly toward Stud for strewing his blankets around.

"Hell," Sam chuckled. "Maybe they'd like to have a little company down there. Ride on, friend. And eat hearty."

"Thank you," Barney said simply as he dismounted and gathered up his blankets. While he tied them behind his saddle, Stud leaned over and whispered to Sam. They mumbled a minute, then Sam rode close as Barney climbed back into leather. Sam had a package in his hand.

"Give this to Jolly Durand. He's foreman of the Double Link. That's the ranch down there."

"Sure thing," Barney said and rode off. By the time he'd reached the first out-buildings of the Double Link, he'd felt, squeezed, shook and rattled the package enough to know what was in it. And that knowledge made him more curious than ever. It brought on an awful fit of itchininess.

THE PACKAGE contained a couple sacks of tobacco and a bottle of whiskey. Now, why in the hell, Barney thought as he scratched, would two tough gents be parked along the trail in the first place? Why'd they treated him like they had? And why were they sending the foreman of the ranch some tobacco and a bottle of whiskey? Ordinarily, a foreman bought that kind of stuff when he went to town. Was this gent Jolly Durand too lazy to ride into town? If he was, how come he was foreman—?

The bullet stopped his thoughts. It came whistling through the darkness and whined over his head. He caught a glimpse of the muzzle flash as he heard the crack of the rifle. The shot came from the porch of the big ranchhouse.

"Hey!" Barney yelled. "Stop that! It's me!"

The shot had aroused the ranch. He heard doors slam open and running boots pound against the earth. Dark shapes flitted around the buildings ahead. The rifle slashed at him again from the house porch. The bullet shrilled close to his ear.

"Cut it out!" Barney yelled. "It's me—I mean—"

Dark shapes loomed around a nearby building. They hauled to a stop, and Barney saw the dim light from the house flash on a gunbarrel, as one of the figures unlimbered his gun.

"And who the hell are *you*?" a raspy voice demanded. "Hist them mitts—you're skylighted—I can see you—hist 'em!"

"Hell, they're histed as high as they'll hist," Barney said in a grieved tone. But he didn't feel grieved at all. He felt good. The itching had stopped. Other feet were running now, but these were light footsteps, and a slim figure joined the group at the corner of a building.

"Make a move toward your gun and I'll shoot to kill this time!"

Barney gaped. It was a girl's voice. It sounded shaky; on the ragged edge of tears, but he was remembering the two shots that had whined over his head.

"Ride closer," the girl went on. "I want to see what kind of man Burke Rogers sent to finish the job."

Barney clucked to his mount and the horse moved forward. Barney was standing up in his stirrups in an effort to get his hands higher.

"Don't know no Burke Rogers ma'am," he said. "I'm a stranger round here. Figgered maybe I could get some grub and a bunk for the night—"

"Git 'im into the light where we c'n see what we caught," the raspy voice said again. "Pay, get his gun, if any."

A man detached himself from the group. He had a curious jerky way of walking. He came close and lifted Barney's gun.

"One six," he reported in a dead, flat voice. "All rusty and fouled."

"Into the bunkhouse with you," the raspy voice ordered. Barney slid to the ground. The group opened up, then closed in around him as he walked to the bunkhouse and stepped inside. The lamp was lit, but the wick turned down. The man called Pay turned the wick up and Barney looked around.

There were five men and one girl. They stared at Barney as if he were a new specimen of a freak, and he stared back. Two of the men were old timers. Pensioners, Barney thought.

You'd think, Barney thought, that by the time men reached their age, they'd quit wearing guns. But the two oldsters wore 'em. Ancient—but efficient—hog-legs, strapped to their skinny old thighs.

The other three men gave Barney a shock. The kind of shock that drove the itch clean off his body. The man called Pay had a face like a dead fish. He stood in a slumped sort of a crouch, long, slim and not used to hard work, obviously he had never strayed far from the two guns on his hips. The second gent was tall and bony, and at first it looked like he wore a perpetual smile. Looking closer, though, a man could see that it was an old scar at the edge of his mouth that gave him that look. Like Pay, he wore two guns.

The third man had a chest like a barrel, arms like a gorilla, and a face that looked as if it had been stepped on too often by a cow. Barney figured him to be the gent with the raspy voice. And he also figured him to be Jolly Durand, the foreman. Only a man with a face like that, could bear a name like Jolly.

BARNEY was turning his attention to the girl when Jolly stepped forward and shoved that awful face close to Barney's.

"Now, talk," he growled, "or I'll break every damn bone in your back. What're you doing snooping 'round here?"

"Like I said, I'm riding grub line," Barney replied mildly. "Figgered I could pick up some grub—"

The girl pushed past Jolly. "You mean no one stopped you on the trail? No one tried to stop you from riding here?"

"I was stopped a mile or so back," Barney admitted. Golly, he thought. Them blue eyes! "Two gents named Sam and

Stud. We talked a while and they let me ride on. Matter of fact, they gimme a package for—"

"You lying whelp!" Jolly snarled and struck. Had the blow landed solid it would of knocked Barney's boot soles off. But Barney had been watching Jolly, and he rolled with the blow. At the same time, he kicked Jolly viciously on the shin, and then sent a larruping right to Jolly's face. Crimson spurted from the foreman's lips. He staggered back against the wall, mouthing foul curses.

Hitting the wall, he bounced like a rubber ball, straight at Barney. Barney saw fists coming at him from every direction. He reeled backwards, riding out the storm, until he could sidestep, then he slammed Jolly in the belly and kicked at his shins again. Jolly roared his hate and charged again. Barney figured he was outweighed a good forty pounds, so he stuck to his same tactics; retreating, sidestepping and getting in as many licks as he could.

Jolly filled the air with profanity and charged again. Barney dodged nimbly and Jolly stumbled over a pair of boots on the floor. Barney saw his chance and lashed forward, his fists connecting with solid, meaty 'thucks' on Jolly's face. At first, it felt like he was hitting a stone wall, and his blows apparently had no effect on Jolly. But after a moment, he saw the big foreman's eyes begin to glaze and he hammered away harder.

But the foreman realized what was happening. He broke away from Barney's fists, staggering backwards out of range. And one big hand whipped toward his gun.

"Jolly! Stop it!" The girl's voice cut through the hubbub like a knife. Jolly hesitated, his gun half clear. One of the old timers spoke, his voice a dull rasp.

"She said stop it," the old timer grunted, one gnarled hand on the smooth butt of his ancient sixgun.

"That was an unprovoked attack, Jolly," the girl went on. "You had no right to do it."

"Damn grub liner," Jolly snarled. "I hate 'em! And we ain't got no food to feed every bum that comes along."

"The Double Link has never turned away a hungry man," the girl said, her face flushing, "and we won't turn this one away." She turned to Barney. "Come to the house. I'll fix you some supper."

Jolly's eyes were still murderous, but he shrugged with an outward show that the affair was over. He turned to the tall gent with the knife scar smile.

"Take care of his horse, Cut." The man slid into the night without a word.

The two old timers hovered around the door as the girl left. Barney followed, and he had a feeling, though he didn't look back, that the two oldsters had trailed along after him. Halfway to the house, they met another man. This one weaved and had to grab a corral post to keep from falling.

"Wassa matter," he mumbled. "What's alla fuss about?"

"Jack, I told you to go to bed and sleep it off," the girl said fiercely.

"Allus preachin'," Jack muttered. "Allus preachin' at me. Got a preacher for a sister. What's alla fuss about?"

The girl didn't answer, but led the way around the big house and into the kitchen. Barney stood inside the darkened doorway while she pulled down the shades and lit the lamp. The light showed streaks of tears down her cheeks.

"I'll have your supper in a jiffy," she told him.

"I'd help you," Barney said, "but I always break things in a kitchen."

He sat down at the table and rolled a cigarette. From somewhere in the big house, he heard a low moan, and bed springs squeak. He saw the girl's back stiffen a moment, then she went on with the meal. Barney drew deeply on his

smoke and sat still a moment, waiting for something to itch. But it didn't. It never did—after he'd gone this far.

"My name's Barney Patton, ma'am," he said, and "I'm grateful for the meal."

"I'm Hester Jonathan," the girl replied without turning around. "My father owns the Double Link."

There was silence in the kitchen until she turned and began to ladle some stew into his plate and pour his coffee. She paused with the coffee cup in her hand.

"Down at the bunkhouse," she said haltingly, "you said something about a package—"

The kitchen door swung open and Jolly Durand stepped inside. He walked softly, very softly, for such a big man, Barney thought, and wondered how long the big foreman had been standing outside.

"There was no package on this hombre's horse," Jolly said. "Cut looked, but there wasn't no package."

"Why would you lie about it?" the girl asked Barney.

"He's up to something, and it ain't good," Jolly broke in. "Hurry up and feed him and we'll send him on his way."

"I was kinda figuring on a bunk for the night," Barney said almost apologetically.

"There ain't no bunks for the likes of you!" Jolly snarled.

"He'll stay," the girl said. "If the bunkhouse is full, he can sleep on the porch."

Jolly started to argue, but just then one of the old timers stepped in, and Jolly clamped his lips tight. The oldster poured himself a cup of coffee as Jolly retreated outside.

"This is Cheyenne," the girl said simply. "The other old timer is Bill Kentucky."

"Reckon I know everybody now," Barney said with a grin. Cheyenne finished his coffee and wiped his long mustache. He said something about putting Barney's blankets on the porch, and went out.

Barney attacked the stew with a big spoon and a chunk of bread. He kept his eyes on his plate, not wanting to see the girl's face.

Because Barney had noted that the kitchen was almost bare of provisions. This stew had been made from a lot of leavings; just thrown together from whatever the girl could find to put in the pot.

He was trying to figure that out; wondering just why a ranch this big and prosperous looking could be out of provisions, when he heard the moan again. This time it was louder, and he identified it as a man in pain. A man tossing and squirming in bed. Without thinking, he swung his eyes toward the girl.

"That's my father," she said quickly, a hot blush creeping into her cheeks. "He's—he's delirious."

"Anything I can do, ma'am?"

For a moment, he saw a flare of wild, desperate hope leap into her eyes, and then it died. It died slow and horrible like, leaving a hopeless, beaten look on her face.

"There's nothing—nothing you can do—tonight," she said.

Barney rolled another smoke. The itching was coming back. Now it was caused by the fact that he didn't know what was going on here. That always made him itch, too, though not quite as bad. He thought of that wild look of hope in the girl's eyes. Maybe, he thought, he could 'rouse it again.

"Maybe in the morning, huh? Maybe in the morning, there's something I could do to help?"

For a moment the girl hesitated, and then the look came back. Not as big as before; but it was there; a cautious look of hope.

"Maybe you can," she said. "You'll find your blankets out on the porch. The back part."

Barney thanked her and went outside. The porch ran around three sides of the house, and the back part was that nearest the kitchen. He stumbled a little over the

steps and walked down the porch till he stepped on his blankets in the dark. Then he sat down and pulled his boots off.

FROM inside the house, he heard the girl's father again, moaning and tossing in pain. He heard the soothing undertones of the girl's voice trying to quiet him. Then he heard something else; the shambling gait of a drunken man, approaching the front door of the house. That would be Jack, the brother, he thought. Jack was having a hard time getting up the front steps. The moaning in the house became louder.

"Why doesn't he die, dammit! Why doesn't he die?" Barney sat quiet. It was Jack's voice, raised in a high screech. "Why does he keep fighting it?" Jack screeched again. "He knows he's done for. Why don't he die?"

His voice trailed off in a drunken whimper and he managed to get up the steps and through the front door. Barney followed his progress by sound as he went up the steps, along a hallway and into a room. The room was right above Barney and in a moment, he could hear Jack snoring loudly.

Barney started to spread his blankets out when his hand hit something hard. He felt around. It was his gun. The man called Pay had it last, Barney thought. Cheyenne must have brought it up when he brought Barney blankets. The feel of the gun was good in his hand. He rummaged around in his warsack till he found what he wanted. Then, humming a soundless little tune, he set to work.

"What the hell you doing?" Barney almost jumped out of his skin. It was Cheyenne's voice, not ten feet away.

"Cleaning my gun," Barney told him.

"It shore needs it," Cheyenne grunted. Something white fluttered toward him. "There's a clean rag. And cut out that damn humming! It ain't purty and I want to get some sleep."

"Yes sir," Barney said respectfully. He finished cleaning his gun and rolled up in his blankets. His thoughts revolved slowly. Sam and Stud on the trail. A package for Jolly Durand—who swore there wasn't any package. A man dying in the big house, and what was it the girl said? Oh yeah. Something about Burke Rogers sending a man to finish the job. What job? And who was Burke Rogers? And why was Cheyenne sleeping so close.

Barney lay quiet for a moment, waiting. But the itch didn't show up. The itch must figure that he was in a big enough mess now, that it could let him alone. He dropped into a sound sleep.

It was Bill Kentucky's boot toe that awakened him next morning. The oldster stood over him, shoving the toe in his ribs.

"Want any breakfast, you'd better roll out," Kentucky grunted. "Twon't last long." Barney nodded and got up. In the kitchen, he saw what Bill Kentucky had meant. The breakfast was meager. The coffee was weak; like it had been made out of left over grounds.

Apparently, everyone else had eaten except Cheyenne and Jolly Durand. In fact, Jolly had finished his breakfast, but he dawdled at the table and seemed in no hurry to leave. Cheyenne finished his breakfast and grimly nursed a cup of coffee, determined to outlast Jolly at the breakfast table.

"Your father, ma'am?" Barney asked. "He got through the night all right?"

"Yes, yes, he did all right," the girl answered quickly. Jolly Durand shot a quick, suspicious glance at Barney, then went back to sipping his coffee. Barney was finishing his meal when he heard stumbling steps on the stairway. Hester hurried out of the kitchen, and Barney thought he saw a look of malignant triumph on Jolly Durand's face.

In a moment, the sound of the girl arguing with her brother carried clearly to the kitchen. She was alternately bawling him out for drinking before breakfast, and then pleading with him to eat something.

Barney gulped his coffee and rolled a smoke. He was wondering how in thunder Jack Jonathan managed to get his whiskey, when all the rest of the supplies at the ranch had run out. He remembered the package he'd brought in, supposedly for Jolly Durand. A bottle of whiskey and some tobacco. He noticed that Jolly rolled a smoke from a sack of tobacco that was just opened.

BARNEY figured that Jolly didn't intend to leave the breakfast table until he did, so he finished his coffee and went out. In a moment, the big foreman followed him. Barney strolled to the corral and leaned against one of the rails. Jolly



kept on toward the bunkhouse. In a few minutes, he, Pay and Cut strolled out and sought the shade of a tree down near the barn. Cheyenne waddled up on his rheumatic legs.

"Don't look like much work's going on here," Barney said conversationally. "Never knowed a ranch to git caught up with its work before. Jolly must be a good foreman."

"Shut up. You know better'n that," Cheyenne growled. "Miss Hester wants to see you at the house. Go in the front door and turn right. Into the office."

Barney nodded and walked toward the house. Halfway there, he passed Bill Kentucky strolling toward the corral to join Cheyenne. Kentucky's face was grim and set, and his eyes were fixed on Jolly and his men down by the barn. Reaching the front door of the big house, Barney turned.

Cheyenne and Kentucky were down at the corral, and Jolly and his men were still at the barn. To approach the house, Jolly and his two man crew would have to pass the two oldsters. And something in the oldsters' stance told Barney that they didn't intend to let that happen. He stepped inside.

"Who're you? Wash your name?"

Seen in daylight, Barney could see the family resemblance between Jack Jonathan and his sister. Jack was standing in the doorway of the big living room that opened to the left of the hallway. He was swaying drunk, and was having trouble keeping his feet. Before he'd given up to liquor, he had been a natty dresser; but now his boots were run over at the heels, his once natty California pants were dirty and wrinkled. One pocket of his silk pongee shirt was half torn off.

Yes, the family resemblance was there, Barney thought, except that Jack's face was weak, and lined with the marks of dissipation.

"Shpeak up!" Jack shrilled. His right

hand fumbled for the fancy ivory handled gun on his hip. "Shpeak up! Who are you? You're not a doctor, are you? By hell, if you're a doctor, I'll—"

He got the fancy gun out and tried to bring it into line with Barney, squinting both eyes with the effort. Barney stepped forward and smacked the gun down. It clattered to the floor and scattered away. Jack cursed and started staring around looking for it. Barney turned to the right and entered the office. Hester Jonathan was fighting back tears.

"About what? *You* ain't drunk. And I'm beholden to you for grub and a bunk last night." He paused, waiting for her to speak, and when she didn't: "Cheyenne said you wanted to see me."

"Last night—you said—that is—you asked if there was anything you could do to help." The girl was near the breaking point. Barney had a funny feeling that he wanted to walk over and put his arm around her shoulder; to try and comfort her.

The idea scared the devil out of him. It was the first time in his life he'd ever had such an idea, so he tried to reject it promptly. But the idea stuck like a burr.

"Yes'm?"

"There is something you can do."

Barney took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Since he'd gotten up this morning, the itching had started up again. Mostly on account of the fact that he didn't know what was going on here. But he knew that the itching was gone for good now.

"Those men—let you ride in last night. They'll let you ride out this morning. I mean—don't you think they will?"

"One way or another," Barney said softly.

"I mean, they'll take you for a saddle tramp—I mean—just a drifter—they'd never suspect that—"

"That I was running an errand for you?"

"That's right—when you get past them—would you ride to Bannock for me? That's a little town about eight miles south of here. There's a telegraph line there—connecting to the county seat."

"County seat means sheriff. And telegraph wires mean a quick way to get word to the sheriff. That right?"

Hester nodded and slipped a folded sheet of paper from the pocket of her dress.

"I—I want you to send this wire when you get to Bannock. If you just ride in and look like you're loafing around, I don't think anyone will bother you—"

"Who," asked Barney is "anyone? A gent named Burke Rogers?"

"Yes," the word was almost a whisper, but it carried a shout of hate in it.

"Can you tell me any more?" Barney asked.

"Only that my father is dying," the girl said. "From blood poisoning. It was supposed to have been an accident—except that it wasn't! It's murder, and I can prove it to the sheriff."

"Blood poisoning?" Barney mused. "Then he's liable to die before the sheriff can bring a doctor from the county seat. Ain't there a doctor in Bannock?"

"Yes, but it would cost you your life to try and bring him out here—even if he would come." Her chin stopped quivering as her body became taut. "Maybe I can't save dad's life, but I can see that his killers get what's coming to them!"

CHAPTER TWO

Sixgun Invitation

BARNEY tucked the sheet of paper in his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap down. There was no itch on him now; only a giddy, warm feeling through his whole body. The feeling was the same as taking a drink on an empty stomach, only it didn't wear off as fast.

"Thanks for the meals, ma'am. I'll be moving along."

There was no sign of Jack as he left the office, but he heard him stumbling around in the kitchen. Somewhere upstairs, a man tossed feverishly and moaned in pain. Barney opened the front door and stepped out.

Even at this distance, he saw Jolly's face snap up as he came out of the house. The big foreman had been whittling on a stick. He shut his knife and stood up. Pay and Cut got to their feet. Barney walked to the corral. He found his saddle, got his rope and dabbed a loop on his horse. From the corner of his eye he saw that Jolly and his two men were strolling toward the corral.

Out of the other eye he saw Cheyenne and Bill Kentucky come out of the bunkhouse and start walking toward him. The two oldtimers reached him first.

"Leaving us?" Cheyenne asked non-committally.

"Hear they got bright lights and such in the big city of Bannock. Figgered to ride that way." He flung his saddle over his mount, reached under and got the cinch. Jolly and his men weren't far off now, but still out of earshot.

"How long's this been going on?" he asked quickly.

"Burke Rogers has been crowding this range for years," Bill Kentucky grunted. "Tried to crowd old man Jonathan. Didn't work. So Rogers worked on Jack. That worked—but it wasn't fast enough."

"I mean the old man."

"Just two—three days," Cheyenne said. "He was helping Jolly fix a fence. Run a rusty nail in his foot. Jolly had been trapping coyotes a while back. Had some coyote bait. Danged stuff was poison."

"Smear a little on a nail, huh—"

"Going somewheres, saddle bum?" Jolly and his two men were stalking forward now, only twenty or thirty feet

away. Pay and Cut had spread out a little. Barney finished cinching the saddle on and turned. Cheyenne and Bill Kentucky had spread out too, their ancient old eyes fastened on Jolly and his crew.

"Got what I come for," Barney said. "A full belly and a night's sleep. Figgered on drifting."

"Not for a day or so," Jolly grunted. "This outfit don't feed saddle tramps for nothing. You can work out the price of them meals."

Barney showed vast surprise. Vast innocent surprise. "Me? Work? What you think I'm riding grub line for?" he demanded in hurt tones. "I tried work oncet. Didn't agree with me."

"Always funning, ainch?" Jolly said with heavy sarcasm. "Well, you work anyhow—for a coupla days."

"Miz Hester told him to hit the trail," Bill Kentucky's voice was soft and low. "Said we didn't have enough grub to keep feeding him. He goes." Barney glanced at Bill Kentucky's holster. It was one of them things that didn't have no bottom. The muzzle of his old gun stuck right out in the open. A man could just tilt that thing up and start shooting. It was the kind of a thing that made a guy what bragged about his fast draw look silly.

Pay and Cut stood off to one side of Jolly, waiting. Barney looked at the big foreman and could almost see his mind working. The big foreman was figuring the odds. He'd think a minute, and his big face, still battered from Barney's fists last night, would light up a little. Then he'd think some more, and his face would turn a little glum. Cheyenne made up his mind for him.

"That's the fanciest belt buckle I ever seen, Jolly. Ketches the sunlight and shines like a new penny. A man couldn't miss seeing that fancy belt buckle, could he?"

Jolly dropped a hand over the buckle. It was a fancy buckle, and it would make one helluva good target to shoot at. Just aim about one inch above it. And them old soft lead bullets in those two ancient sixshooters would tear a man's guts to hellangone. Jolly looked at Barney and scowled.

"On your way, saddle bum. And don't pester us no more. Savvy?"

"Thanks for your hospitality," Barney said respectfully and shoved his boot in the stirrups. He nodded a grave goodbye to them and took the same trail that he'd ridden in on the night before. There was a scowl on his face as he rode out. That damned old Cheyenne! The old hawg! Howcome he thought he could pick Jolly for his own personal target? He'd have to talk to Cheyenne about that!

ONCE past the buildings of the ranch, he spurred his mount into a high lope. He wanted to get past Sam and Stud as soon as possible. He had a strong hunch that while Jolly had let him go, he'd manage somehow to get word that Barney was to be watched. But he figured that Bill Kentucky and Cheyenne would keep an eye on Jolly for a few minutes, anyhow.

Sam and Stud showed up on time. At the same place in the trail where the brush was thick, they rode out and sat their horses.

"What's your hurry, friend?" Sam asked. "Your horse'll be wore out inside an hour at that pace."

"Trying to find me a square meal," Barney said sadly. "The food down there was lousy."

Sam and Stud had their laugh over that. Sam rolled a smoke, still chuckling.

"Jolly git his package all right?"

"He got it," Barney answered shortly. "Maybe you could tell me the way to the nearest good eating place. I mean a regular cafay."

Sam and Spud looked at each other. "Stranger in these parts?" Sam asked conversationally. Barney nodded, and Sam became even more affable.

"Nearest town is about twelve miles. North of here. Place named Goshen. Good eating place there. A chink runs it."

"Twelve miles?" Barney repeated sadly. "No place nearer'n that?"

"That's the closest town, cowboy," Stud said firmly. "Over that ridge, you come to a fork in the trail. Take the north trail—and keep riding."

Barney nodded and clucked to his mount. Sam and Stud, all grins and smiles, pulled aside to let him pass. Barney wondered how those grins would look if they had some teeth knocked out with a lead slug. He came to the fork of the trail and turned south, using the spurs to tickle his big cayuse into a gallop.

A mile farther on, the trail led over the top of a hill. To follow it would skylight Barney, so he rode below the crest of the hill. Then curiosity got the better of him, and he poked his head over the crest, to see what he could see.

He could still see the Double Link ranch far below. And then he saw something else. Sunlight flashed on something shiny. Barney scratched his ear.

"A hellow—a heeleo—a—aw, to hell with it," he snorted. "It's a way of signaling by flashing sunlight on a mirror. I heard about it the time I almost joined the cavalry."

He looked along his back trail. A little cloud of dust began to rise from about the place he's left Sam and Stud. He watched it for a moment. It was moving fast. Moving south, towards Bannock. And it wasn't following the trail.

Barney wheeled his horse and started straight across country, over the low foothills, on a course that he figured would intercept that moving dust cloud. He topped a low, bushy hilltop and looked

down. The rider was still a mile or so away, pounding along a little used trail. Barney tickled his horse with the spurs and went down the hill. He reached the bottom while the rider was still a quarter of a mile away. He stopped his horse in the center of the trail, a few yards from a turn in the trail.

He started to roll a smoke, but he didn't have time. Before it was finished he heard the pounds of the horse's hoofs. Barney hipped around in the saddle and waited. In another moment, the horse and rider pounded into view. It was Stud.

"YOU damn fool!" Stud shouted, pulling his horse back on its haunches. "We told you to go north."

"Yeah, I know," Barney said. "But I'm going to Bannock. Got a message to send over the telegraph for Miss Hester—"

Stud swore, and his hand lashed downward. Barney's horse saw the move and took one jump ahead. It had taken Barney a long time to teach that fool horse the trick. But it was worth it. Stud's first slug whined where Barney had been.

Barney didn't miss. He felt the Colt thud against the heel of his hand, and saw the grin he'd been wondering about spread over Stud's face. But it wasn't pretty. It was messy. Stud's horse snorted and leaped in fright. Stud's body hung loosely in the saddle for a moment, then slid to the ground all limp, as if it didn't have any bones in it. Barney rode toward Bannock.

Bannock wasn't much of a town. It sprawled and straggled over a ten acre patch of dust. The main street meandered from the little church at the far end of town to the dusty livery at this end. Dusty, false fronted buildings flanked main street. Halfway down the street was the stage office, and Barney

saw a single wire leading from a telegraph pole into the building. He pulled in to the hitching rack.

The stage office was empty except for the narrow faced clerk behind the desk. At Barney's entrance, he adjusted his celluloid cuffs, straightened the green eye shade and walked over to the counter.

"Kin you work that thing?" Barney asked, pointing to the telegraph key.

"Of course," the clerk said haughtily. "That's part of my job."

"Jest wanted to be sure," Barney said. "Got a message I want sent right away." He drew the sheet of paper from his pocket and passed it over. "Here it is. How long does it take for them words to run along that wire?"

A faint burst of laughter reached his ears as he handed the paper over. Barney turned curiously. Three men had come out of the saloon across the street. Two of them were dressed in ordinary range clothes. The third man wore fancy stitched boots; fawn colored pants, a spotless white shirt and a spotless white Stetson. A man coming along the sidewalk spoke loudly and waved his hand in a large gesture of friendship to the fancy dressed man. 'Fancy-pants,' Barney noted, merely nodded a curt greeting.

"Range duds," Barney was thinking. "The kind that hire other men to do their dirty work. The kind that grow powerful because they hire men to kill for that power"—his thoughts broke off as he became aware of the clerk's gasp of astonishment.

Barney looked at the clerk. He dropped the paper as if it were a live rattlesnake. His hand shook as he wiped beads of perspiration from his upper lip.

"I—I can't send that message," the clerk said. He glanced across the street, and his agitation became worse. He snatched up the paper and shoved it in Barney's shirt pocket. "Git out of here," he said quickly.

Barney drummed on the counter. Then he jerked a thumb to the fancy dressed man across the street.

"Burke Rogers, huh?"

"Get out of here," the clerk repeated nervously. "And ride right on out of town. Nobody'll know. I won't say anything."

Barney spat towards the spittoon and missed by a good two feet. "Had me a hunch I'd run into trouble gitting that message sent," he said, half to himself. He looked at the clerk with speculative eyes. "I could tickle your backbone with a gun muzzle and make you send it—only," he sighed, "how the hell would I know what you was sending?"

"That's right," the clerk said eagerly. "I could send anything. You wouldn't know. Best thing is for you to leave. I—I haven't heard anything about any trouble at the Double Link. I won't say a word. You go, huh? It's my dinner time. I've got to close up."

"Dull time of the day for you, huh?"

"Nothing doing till the middle of the afternoon," the clerk said. "You go now. I've got to close up and go eat."

CHAPTER THREE

Bushwhackers Boothill

BARNEY considered. "Nobody'll notice nothing wrong here for an hour or two. Ought to be time enough." He lifted his gun. The clerk gasped and tried to duck, but Barney hit him just over the ear. The clerk moaned softly and sagged to the floor. Barney looked outside, but no one was paying any attention to the telegraph office. He vaulted over the counter, found some stout twine and lashed the clerk's wrist and ankles.

"And a gag to keep you quiet," he added softly, shoving the clerk's bandana into his mouth. Then he walked over and pulled down the front shades. He found

a little sign 'Gone to Lunch' and hung it over the knob of the door as he pulled it shut after him.

The livery was his first stop. He left his horse there and rented a buckboard and a fast team. He drove the wagon to the general store and clumped inside.

"Want to buy some supplies for the Double Link ranch," he said.

"Never seen you before," the storekeeper said doubtfully. Barney pulled out the note Hester Jonathan had given him. He folded it back until just her signature was visible and showed it to the storekeeper.

"Okay, make out your list," the storekeeper said, shoving paper and pencil at him. Barney bent over, and out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a man leave the store. The man wore range clothes, but he also wore two guns—tied down. Barney scribbled away, but kept his eye on the man.

The gent angled across the street, and then stopped and talked to the fancy dressed gent over there. Burke Rogers. All eyes turned curiously toward the buckboard Barney had rented.

Presently, the two men who'd been talking to Rogers broke away and strolled down the street. They took up their stance near the buckboard.

"There's the list," Barney said. "Where'll I find the Doc in this town?"

"Right down the street," the storekeeper said, pointing. "Then upstairs. See his sign down there?"

Barney saw it, and gulped. It was a couple of doors past where Burke Rogers was standing. He thanks the storekeeper and walked out. The two men near the buckboard shifted their feet easily as he walked past them. But neither made a move to stop him.

He felt the impact of Burke Rogers' eyes on him as he walked along, and he stared back curiously. Rogers could have been considered handsome; except that his lips were too tight and compressed, and his eyes too close set, and with a hard, calculating glint in them.

He heard Rogers grunt in surprise as he turned in the doorway that lead upstairs to the doctor's office. He'd reached the top of the stairs when he heard the faint tread of someone else on the stairs below him. He didn't look back, but opened the door of the office.

"The sign said Doc Murphy. That you?" Barney asked the small framed man behind the desk.

"That's right," the doctor answered briskly. "You don't look sick or hurt."

"Tain't me, Doc." The man had reached the top of the stairs now, and Barney knew he was listening outside the door. If the doctor had heard anything unusual, he gave no sign. Barney

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studied the medico carefully, wondering if the doctor would fold up.

Mentally, he shook his head. He'd never met a medico who shrank from going to attend a patient, no matter what the consequences might be.

But there was that man outside the door, and Barney was remembering the girl's words: "It would cost you your life to try and bring the Doc out."

"'T aint me, Doc." Barney repeated in a louder tone. "It's Miss Hester Jonathan. She's in bad shape."

"Hester—why, I saw her less than two weeks ago. Healthy as could be."

"Her paw died," Barney went on. "And she—"

"Dan Jonathan dead!" the doctor ejaculated. "That's hard to believe! He was as healthy—"

"He got blood poisoning and popped off just like that," Barney snapped his fingers. "Nobody thought anything was wrong at first. Till it was too late to call you. It tore Miss Hester up something awful. Kinda having hysterics—"

"Did I hear you say that Dan Jonathan was dead?"

Barney whirled as Burke Rogers stepped into the office. Barney got the idea that Rogers was holstering his gun as he came through the door. Rogers smiled politely and explained that he'd been entering the doctor's office when he'd heard Jonathan's name mentioned.

"Hard to believe that the man could go so quick," Rogers finished smoothly. "But blood poisoning—that's fast."

"I'll get my bag and go right out," Doc Murphy said. He disappeared beyond a curtained partition into the next room. Rogers turned to Barney.

"Never saw you before," he said coldly.

"I rode in last night," Barney explained easily, and saw Rogers' eyes narrow quickly. "Oh, Sam and Stud stopped me all right. But you see, I know Jolly—away back when."

"Trying to cut yourself in, eh?" Rogers' eyes were narrowed with hate and greed. "Twon't work—"

"Just a cut of Jolly's share," Barney said easily. "That's all."

He had an urge to send a couple of slugs through Rogers' guts right now and get it over with. But there was the girl's father to think of. The first consideration was to get a doctor to old man Jonathan. Barney sighed. The cleanup would have to wait until then.

"How'd Jake take the old man's kicking off?" Rogers asked curtly.

Barney shrugged. "How'd you expect?"

Rogers grinned. It reminded Barney of a snake ready to swallow a rabbit.

"Tell Jack I'll be out later with the papers for him to sign," Rogers said softly, as they heard Doc Murphy's returning footsteps.

"I got a buckboard and a fast team," Barney said. "Let's go." Rogers stood aside, with a cold smile on his face as they walked out. On the sidewalk Barney saw Rogers motion his scattered men, and he and the doctor were not molested as they climbed into the buckboard.

THEY were halfway to the Double Link before Barney spoke.

"Ever knock a man in the head, Doc? If you ain't, you're gonna start in now. Gent by the name of Sam. A gunslick hired by Burke Rogers. He's guarding the trail to the Double Link. You hide behind them grain sacks. When Sam stops us, lift that axe handle I bought and let him have it behind the ear."

"What in thunder are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you," Barney said grimly, and told Murphy what he knew. Surprise, amazement, then anger washed over the doctor's face. Then without a word, he climbed off the seat and dropped behind the grain sacks, hefting the axe handle.

"From what you told me I think I know the whole story," Doc said. "Jack/Jonathan has been going to the dogs since. Big stake gambling and losing money to Burke Rogers. A while back, Jack took a trip. He come back all shaky. I think he got in some kind of trouble, and Rogers has been holding it over his head."

"We'll soon know the answers—Sam ought to be just ahead."

But as they rolled along, Sam didn't appear. Then suddenly Barney swore.

"Damn! There's Stud's horse. And Sam's gone! The horse came back without Stud and Sam went to look for him. He knows by now that something's wrong. Hang on, Doc! And keep behind them sacks!"

The buckboard rattled and thundered down the gentle slope toward the Double Link. Barney saw Cheyenne and Bill Kentucky come out of the house and stare toward him. Then Jolly, Pay and Cut came out of the bunkhouse.

"I'll head straight for the back door, Doc. You skip inside. The main thing is for you to git to Jonathan right away!"

Jolly and his men were becoming more curious about the rocketing buckboard now. They trotted out from the bunkhouse.

"It's that damn saddle bum!" Jolly's yell reached Barney faintly. "What the hell's he doing back here—"

Barney was past them now. Jolly yelled something else, and the three of them started running toward the house. Bill Kentucky bellowed a warning to them, and they slowed down, uncertain as to what was going on, and what they could do about it. Barney wheeled the buckboard around the corner of the house and hauled back on the lines.

"Jump, Doc!"

Doc Murphy was ready. He leaped to the ground, seemed to bounce twice on the balls of his feet and disappeared through the back door. The team was

hard to stop, and Barney was around the house before he could manage it.

"Brought some supplies out," Barney sang out cheerfully.

Jolly's face was a mask of disbelief for a moment. But he hadn't been able to see Doc Murphy go in the back door. Barney kept talking fast.

Jolly listened, still puzzled, and finally disgusted. He motioned to Pay and Cut and stalked toward the bunkhouse. Barney mounted the porch.

"I brought a doc out for the old man," he explained swiftly. "Also tricked Rogers into talking. Jolly's in this up to his neck."

"Been knowing that all along," the two oldsters said together.

"Then this is the payoff," Barney said.

"Let 'em git in the bunkhouse," Cheyenne grunted. "We'll tackle 'em there. I'll take the front door—you two, the windows. Then we'll go after Rogers—hell!"

HORSEMEN—five of them—were pounding down the trail toward the Double Link. Barney didn't have to look twice to recognize the two men in the lead or to know what had happened. One was Stud, the guard on the trail. The other was Burke Rogers. Stud had found Sam's body—and guessed the truth and gone after his boss.

Burke Rogers stood up in his stirrups.

"Jolly—you damn fool! The doctor is out here! That damn grub line rider—"

"Pot's open, make your bets," Bill Kentucky said, and his ancient old six-gun thundered. Pay had been turning, dropping to one knee and lifting his gun. Bill's bullet hit him square in the chest.

Jolly and Cut were racing for the protection of the bunkhouse. They didn't make it; but they got as far as the corral and flung themselves behind the corral posts, their guns blasting.

"Spread out and keep down!" Barney

yelled. He scuttled along the porch, snapped a shot at Cut, driving the man back to cover. Cheyenne moaned and grabbed his shoulder.

"Look out!" he yelled weakly. "They're gonna hit us from two sides!"

Burke Rogers had led his men around to one side of the house, and now was charging straight for it. Jolly and Cut had left the protection of the corral posts and were closing in from the other. In another moment, Barney groaned, they'd be caught in a whipsaw crossfire.

He winged Cut with a slug in the leg. He thumbed back for the finishing shot—when a new note blasted into the rattle of guns. A rifle! And coming from an upstairs window!

Barney squawled delightedly as he saw the rifle fire cut down two of Rogers' men. Then Rogers reeled in the saddle. But the man wasn't done for. He stood up in the stirrups, his face a mask of hate, gun hammering toward that window.

"Damn you, Jack! I'll take you with me—"

"Here comes Jolly and my gun's empty!" Bill Kentucky swore. Barney came to his feet. Jolly was racing toward the porch, both his guns flaming. Something hard and painful tore into Barney's side. It flung him down. He just lay there and stretched his gun arm out. His sights centered on the shiny buckle around Jolly's belly—lifted a fraction—then the gun kicked. . . .

Barney turned, vaguely remembering that men were rushing him from the side. But strangely, they weren't. They were retreating. Two men lay on the ground. One of them was Stud. The other was Burke Rogers. Rogers was up on one elbow. The gun in his hand spurted flame. Barney heard a choked cry, then something fell from the upstairs window and hit the ground with a sick-

ening thud. It was the body of Jack Jonathan.

It was the third day after the fight. Barney lay contentedly, just scratching a small itch here and there. He'd gotten the whole story by now. How Burke Rogers had traded on Jack Jonathan's weakness for whiskey until he'd had Jack in debt to him. How he'd made him steal to pay him off, then held a threat of prison sentence over Jack's head. How Jack had signed notes that would turn over his share of the Double Link to Rogers on the death of Jack's father.

And how Burke Rogers had gotten impatient for old Dan Jonathan to die and had hired Jolly and his men to hurry the process up. With whiskey and threats, Jack Jonathan had been kept from fighting the plan. And now Jack Jonathan had snapped out of it at the last, and had died like a man should.

Hester came in with a tray of food. There was a little vase on the tray with some flowers in it. It looked nice, reminded Barney of the outdoors that he hadn't seen in three days. Hester smiled down at him, and the itch sneaked back.

"Dad lost his leg, but Doc Murphy saved his life," Hester said brightly. "We owe you a lot, Barney." She slid an arm under his shoulders. "Here, let me raise you up while you eat this broth."

She had the spoon halfway to his lips when Barney started to scratch. "Is there something wrong, Barney? Have you got a rash? Poison oak, perhaps?"

"No'm," Barney said sadly. "It's just that I get the itch when I see something I want to do, and know I hadn't ought to."

"What is it you want to do—but don't think you should?"

Barney was scratching like mad. He'd never kissed a girl like Hester before. But he knew he was going to have to kiss her—or scratch himself to death. . . .

HELL-ON-THE-HIP!

By Barry Cord

When Lorry Gallion and his sister Peggy bought chips in that hell-for-breakfast range, they didn't know a cold-deck from a bob-tailed flush—but they were sure to find out—if Lorry had to cash in his last white chips to learn!

THE DOUBLE G ranchhouse huddled under the towering wall of the Culebras, a lost and lonely habitation on the edge of the desert. Low hanging clouds splattered rain against the windows, deepening the premature dark.

Peggy Gallion pressed a white face against the window and tried to pierce the darkness of the road to Acrid Springs.

The lawman's gun lanced flame as Bias tried to go for his gun.



Somewhere along that blotted-out trail her brother should be riding. But even as she waited she knew that Lorry had gotten into trouble.

He had gone out looking for it, though he had protested otherwise. She could tell by the way he tilted his stubborn chin, the way he had waved to her in the yard.

Coffee bubbled on the kitchen range behind her and began to boil over, filling the room with its strong aroma. Unheeding, the girl stared out into the night.

The minutes dragged, piling the fear in her. Finally, as if in answer to her mute prayer, came the sound of a fast running horse.

Peggy's throat was dry as she turned away from the window and ran to the door. Rain slashed into the little kitchen as she stood in the doorway, eyes straining into the dark. Light from the table lamp threw her taut, slim shadow into the muddy yard. In the shaft of yellow light raindrops charged like tiny glistening gladiators across the doorway.

She recognized the rider, the heavy-chested bay, as they loomed up out of the dark. *Lorry!* A sob escaped her. For the boy astride that lathered animal was slumped low over the saddle horn, and he was bareheaded.

Peggy ran into the yard. The horse pulled to stop before her trim, gingham clad figure. The man in saddle had red hair that rain had plastered down on his forehead. His range clothes were soaked. High up in his right shoulder his blue shirt was dark with blood.

Lorry came unsteadily out of saddle, his blue eyes seeking his sister's distraught face. He summoned a reassuring smile to his lips.

"It's nothing, Sis," he muttered weakly. "Just a scratch." His knees buckled a little and he threw his arm across her shoulders to steady himself.

"What happened?" cried Peggy. "How did you get hurt?"

Hate twisted the smile on Lorry's young face. "Blass!" he said thickly. "I went to town to see him, Peg—to tell him about our cows—an' he laughed in my face . . ."

HE SHOOK his head suddenly, trying to dispel a sudden weakness. Peggy felt his weight on her.

"Blass laughed at me," the youngster continued. "Said I was a young fool. When I told him about our cattle—the herd we had pinned our hopes on—he said it was none of his business. He hadn't guaranteed the stock against rustlers when he sold them to us."

Wiped out! The thought was in Peggy as she felt her brother stiffen. Their little dream of a place of their own, a bit of independence, was gone—she heard it go in the bitter rage in Lorry's voice.

"Only Blass knew we had our stock grazin' in Sleepy Man's Hollow," he said. "The cows we bought from him. . ."

The girl stared off into the wet night, feeling the darkness crowd in on her loneliness.

"Slag Blass—the boss of Acrid Springs!" Lorry cried. His voice was thin and bitter. "I knew—when he laughed—the game he had played, Peg. It was his men who cleaned us out."

Rain swirled over them as he slumped. The whitefaced girl held him up. With a strength she had not believed herself capable of, she dragged his half conscious body into the kitchen and shut the door against the rain.

Slowly she eased him down into a straight-backed rocker that had traveled with her mother in a covered wagon from St. Joseph to northern Arizona. With a cloth she wet at the kitchen pump she revived Lorry. Then she examined his wound. The bullet had ranged upward, scraping a bone, and was not serious. Peggy set to work with warm water, antiseptic and bandages, while Lorry talked.

"I'll have to go, Peg!" he muttered.

through gritted teeth. "Have to hit the trail—'fore they come . . ."

"Why?" Peggy cried.

"I killed a man tonight—in Blass' office—"

"No!" Peggy lifted a hand to her mouth. "Lorry, you promised . . ."

"I had to!" the youngster interrupted harshly. "They—they laughed at me. Then this man, one of Blass' gunmen, shoved me." Pride shook Lorry's voice.

"I hit him—an' he drew on me. I beat him to it. I guess Blass never expected that. No one made a move when I backed out of his office—" he dropped his gaze, not wanting to tell his sister more, not willing to let her see the look in his eyes.

"There must be some other way," Peggy said, "instead of running away. There must have been witnesses to prove it was self-defense. Surely if you saw the sheriff—"

Lorry shook his head. "With Blass ready to testify against me?" A thin laugh escaped him. "There's no alternative for me, Peg—except to take to the owlhoot."

"Then I'm coming with you!"

"No!" Lorry jerked erect, then winced. "This is good-bye, Peg. Sell what's left of the ranch—go back East. Go anywhere, so long as it's away from here. Far away from Acrid Springs—"

His voice sheared off. A hard glint came into his blue eyes. A brown hand swung to the gun on his hip. "Too late!" he whispered tightly. "Blass. . . ."

THE HOWLING WIND affirmed his dread. Above the rattle of the rain on the roof came the staccato beat of horses hoofs.

The table lamp guttered softly in the sudden stillness. Lorry came out of the rocker, crouching a little as he faced the door. Like an animal at bay he drew his gun and waited.

The girl swung around at the sound of his gun clearing holster. "No, Lorry!"

she cried, gripping his arm. "Not this way—you'll be killed—" She struggled with the suddenly wild youngster facing the door.

The sound of a horse pulling up in the yard was lost to them. Someone knocked sharply on the door. It shocked Peggy into rigidity. She turned a frightened face toward the sound, and in that instant Lorry Gallian swept her aside and faced the door. Hate corded his lean face.

"Come in, Blass!" he snarled. And fired through the door.

A ragged hole appeared in the wood. Another. Peggy's scream knifed above the explosions—it was cut off short by the hand she lifted to her mouth.

The explosions faded into the sound of rain tapping against the window. Lorry swayed, his lips curled back from his teeth, eyes on the door.

"Come in, Blass!" Lorry sneered.

The door flipped open. A tall figure stepped inside, his lanky body bending behind the Colt that glinted in his fist.

Lorry cursed as he swiveled his six-gun. Flame lanced viciously from the gun in the newcomer's fist, the leaden slug slapping the weapon from Lorry's unsteady hand.

Lorry staggered. He caught himself, tried to focus his dimming gaze on the stranger who stood crouched just inside the kitchen. Behind him his long shadow wavered in the muddy yard. Close to the small stoop a rangy black horse stamped restlessly.

"Sorry," Lorry mumbled. "Damn sorry. I—I took you for—" His legs buckled. He was unconscious when he hit the floor.

Peggy ran to her brother, knelt beside him. Turning, she lifted frightened eyes to the hard-faced man in the doorway. "It was all a mistake," she attempted to explain. "A bad mistake. Lorry thought you were someone else—"

The tall man nodded gravely. Holstering his Colt he closed the door against

the rain. "It wasn't what you would call a warm welcome, ma'am," he said, lifting his right arm slightly to show where one of Lorry's bullets had sheared the wet shirt close to his ribs. "I was headin' for Acrid Springs when the storm caught up with me. Guess I kinda lost my way after that. The light in yore window looked invitin', so I turned in here."

The girl nodded, mutely. Lorry groaned at her side. She slid her arm under him and tried to sit him up.

The stranger paced forward. "Here—let me help you with him."

"Peggy looked up. "Please take him to his bed."

The tall man bent, gathered Lorry up in his arms and carried him into a back room. The youngster mumbled incoherently as he was eased down onto the bed.

Peggy placed a hand on his forehead. It was warm, but not uncommonly so, and the fear left her. The stranger was looking down at Lorry, and glancing at him she surprised a tiny frown over his eyes.

He grinned when his eyes met her, and unconsciously Peggy noticed him—noticed the way his soaked black shirt clung to his flat-muscled body, the grave line of his jaw which even his grin did not entirely dispel, and the steadiness of his gray eyes.

There was something gentle and quiet about this man, and his presence here calmed her.

CONCERN was suddenly in her voice: "Gracious—you're soaked to the skin. Let me get you some of Lorry's clothes." She ran a judging eye over his length. "They should fit you, although the pants will be a little short." Her eyes lightened. "You're a tall man, Mr. . . ."

"Tex," he supplied easily. "Just Tex." He smiled. "I do feel like a wet dogie, ma'am—"

"I'm Peggy," the girl said candidly. "Peggy Gallion."

The smile lengthened on his lips. "It's

a nice name, Peggy. I once knew . . ."

He paused as the girl stiffened, and the smile died out of his eyes. Into the stillness of that bedroom drifted the sound of riding men.

"*Blass!*" The name was harsh on Peggy's lips. "He's come to get Lorry!"

Tex saw the desperation in her. Her eyes went to her brother, unconscious on the bed, then her lips tightened. With quick determination she swung around the bed to a small clothes closet.

The rifle she took from within seemed too heavy for her. Tex frowned. He reached out his hand as she stepped past him, heading for the kitchen. "I'll take it," he said. He took the rifle from her and replaced it inside the closet. He was tall and commanding as he turned back to her.

"We'll talk to Blass," he said slowly. "He won't bother yore brother. I promise you that, Peggy."

BLASS wasted no time pounding on the door. He put his thick shoulder against it, not trying to see if it was unlocked. The door slammed back and he shuffled into the room, pausing to stare at the slim, defiant girl and the tall, cool stranger facing him.

His face was wet with rain, and scowling with the expectancy of trouble. The light struck his flat, broad face, deepening the lines around his mouth.

He had opened his slicker to provide easy access to the gun strapped to his left thigh. He had come expecting trouble, and he had brought company.

They slipped into the kitchen behind him, two lean-flanked gunsters who had preferred discomfort to impediment and put aside slickers for brush jackets. Their narrow-legged pants were plastered to their hips, but the hands that held the Colt's were dry and steady. The narrower-shouldered gunster kicked the door shut and eased back against it, his eyes closed against the light. The other glanced

at Blass, waiting for orders before shooting.

Anger loosened Peggy's tongue. "You have no right breaking in here like that—"

Blass glanced at Tex as he said: "This is my right," tapping his holstered gun. Then, abruptly: "Where's yore brother?"

Peggy glanced helplessly at Tex. "He's hurt—"

"He's in that bedroom," Tex interrupted, indicating the room with a nod of his head. "*Wait a minute!*" The sudden change in his tone held Blass as the big man started for the door. "The kid's in there, hurt—he won't run away. Before you do any more unwelcome prowling around, just who are you? An' what do you want?"

Blass paused. He was conscious of his hirelings behind him. He had the guns to brush aside this cool stranger's defiance, but something in the man's gray eyes touched a warning in him.

"Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"A passin' pilgrim," the other replied. "Came in here to get out of the rain."

Blass turned his attention to the girl. "Yore brother killed one of my men in my office!" he said harshly. "Did you know that?"

"Yes," Peggy said. "He told me." Her voice suddenly blazed: "But if he killed a man, it was because he was forced to it—"

"I have six witnesses who know different and will testify," Blass interrupted. "He came bustin' into my office like a wild man, demanding money because his cattle were stolen—"

"We bought them from you!" Peggy flared. "And a week later we were raided. Our entire stock taken."

"I sold you cattle, not protection!" sneered Blass impatiently. "You can't blame me if yore cattle was rustled. This is hard country. You'll have to learn to take things without a lot of bawlin—"

"Not when we know you tricked us!"

Peggy cried. "We don't have to take that!" Her anger had hardened the softness of her lips, and they curled now with helpless rage. "Lorry had earmarked most of our stock—cut tiny Xs as a precaution. Yesterday he ran across some of our cattle on your range, Blass. That's why he came to town!"

"You can't prove anythin' with a yarn like that!" snapped Blass.

"Mebbe not," intruded Tex. "What you want the kid for?"

"For the killin' of Cassidy. An' for robbery!"

"I don't see the law with you," Tex pointed out.

"Sheriff Calhoun was busy. He deputized us before we left town."

"How very convenient!" said Peggy bitterly. She was close to tears. "There's nothing to prevent you from shooting my brother on the way back to town, and then claiming he tried to get away from you!"

The light in Blass's dark eyes glittered, then he laughed. "He won't get away from us—I promise you that." He turned impatiently and jerked a thumb toward the bedroom. "Mike—get in there an' haul the kid out."

"He's hurt!" Peggy cried. "I tell you he's too hurt to ride."

Mike brushed past her, his Colt held close in to his hip and ready against emergency.

Peggy felt her helplessness. She turned to Tex, expecting aid, her mind refusing the tangible threat of the gun in the gunster's hand. "Do something!" she cried. "Don't let them draw Lorry . . ."

Mike's sharp cursing stilled her. The gunman came to the door, his voice sharp with disappointment. "Blass! He's not in here. The window's wide open."

Even as he talked a horse whinnied angrily outside. There was the quick sound of mincing hoofs, then the sudden, sodden pound of them pulling away from the house.

Blass pivoted toward the door. The sharp-eyed gunster was swinging it open and the burly man brushed past him, drawing his Colt on the way. He shot twice into the night before he turned, his heavy face dark with frustration. "A neat trick!" he snarled. "Kept me talkin' while he made a getaway. But he won't get far—"

Mike pushed past him, heading for his horse. The other gunster was already mounting. Blass let his anger ride his words as he turned: "An' we won't make the same mistake again. This time we're shootin' first—"

THE SOUND of their departure came into the kitchen and faded, leaving a strained stillness. Tex walked to the open door. The rain was changing to a drizzle and over the Culebras a few stars showed, promising clear weather by morning.

The tall man saw that the yard was empty—evidently young Gallion had taken his black to make his escape. His eyes hardened, but he kept his tone soft and quiet as he turned to the girl.

"You have a horse I can borrow, Peggy?"

The girl was still staring at the door, her white face stiff with fear for her brother. He repeated the question before she answered him.

"Yes. . . . in the barn behind the house." Then, in a small frightened voice she said: "They'll kill him when they catch him."

"Let me have a saddle an' a horse, I'll see that he gets a fair deal, Peggy."

She turned to him, frowning. "You can have the horse. But how will you find Lorry? How do you know where he's gone? . . ."

He smiled. "I'll answer that later." He started for the door, but she caught up with him. "I'm coming with you," she said. "You'll find a bay and two roans in the barn—the gray is too old for hard riding. The bay is the one Lorry rode—it's

probably winded. We'll have to saddle the roans."

She went back to her room and changed into a pair of worn Levis, a tan blouse and a brush jacket, clothes she often wore while riding about the ranch. Tex had the animals saddled when she joined him in the barn. He watched her face in the lantern light, and he found her beautiful. Her long chestnut hair was coiled and caught under a yellow silk bandanna, and she looked small and helpless in that moment.

The wet gray bluffs of the Culebras looked down on them as they rode off the main trail to Acrid Springs and followed a pathless way toward the hills. Peggy followed Tex unquestioningly, sensing that he knew where he was going. They finally stopped on the edge of a small clearing where a lone oak loomed dark against a clearing sky.

Tex said: "Wait here." He dismounted and walked to the oak and looked down at the ground. When he came back he said: "He hasn't got here yet. Maybe he's been tryin' to shake Blass an' his men off."

Peggy shook her head. "But why are you so sure Lorry will come here. What reason has he—"

"He'll come," Tex said. "We'll wait. You'll get yore answer when he comes."

They waited, hidden from the clearing by giant rocks. Morning came swiftly as the sky cleared. A rosy glow began to push up from the east. . . .

Tex snuffed out his cigaret as a horseman appeared on the far side of the clearing. It was Lorry. The kid was slumped over the big black's neck. He roused himself as he rode into the clearing, and turned the black toward the oak.

Tex put a warning finger to his lips as Peggy started to cry out. "Wait!" he whispered. Somewhere behind Lorry, along the way he had come, an iron shod hoof rang briefly on granite, and Peggy knew that Lorry had not lost Blass and his hirelings.

Lorry did not seem to hear. He half fell out of saddle, and immediately began to claw the soft, rain washed earth near the roots of the oak. He dug a small shallow hole, then tried another.

He was still digging frantically when Blass walked his horse into the clearing. Mike and the other gunman sided him.

Lorry straightened when he saw them, leaned unsteadily against the gnarled trunk.

"So that's where you hid it?" Blass rasped.

Lorry sneered. His hair was down over his bitter eyes. "You ought to know. You've got yore money, Blass—what more do you want?"

Blass frowned. "Don't get ahead of yoreself, kid. You know what I want. The money you took from my office—"

Tex's fingers tightened warningly on Peggy's arm. Then he stepped out into the clearing, his voice stopping Blass as the big man was turning to mount.

"Wait a minute, Blass! You won't have to ride that far for the money!"

Blass had one foot in his stirrup. He whirled at the sound of Tex's voice. Mike's horse moved skittishly as the gunman stabbed for his weapon.

Tex's Colt glinted in the early morning light, its unwavering muzzle freezing Blass and his men. Lorry straightened, resting his back against the oak.

"How'd you get here?" Blass snarled.

"Rode." Tex glanced at Lorry. "You were right about someone followin' you last night, kid. I was comin' down the Culebra trail when I saw you hide that money under this tree." He smiled briefly. "If you had bothered to look inside the black's saddle bags you'd have found the money."

Blass' eyes narrowed. "Much obliged, stranger. I'll take the money now—an' take the kid in. He'll have to stand trial for robbery an' murder—"

Tex shrugged. "You'll find the money in my bag."

"I've been waitin' to see who'd claim that money!" Tex said. His voice was edged. "I thought it was the kid, at first—that's why I followed him home."

Blass turned, sensing the change in the tall man. "What's yore interest in this?" he snapped.

Tex slid his left hand into his pants pocket. The morning light glinted from the badge in the palm of his hand. "I'm Tex Holden, U.S. Deputy Marshal. An' I'm arrestin' you for the Stockton Bank robbery an' for the murder of Lansing, the bank cashier—"

Blass stiffened. "You can't prove—" He never finished. Mike, nervous at sight of a badge, made a jerk for his gun. Tex killed him before he cleared holster. His frightened animal collided with that of the other gunman, spoiling that man's shot and Tex's return fire spilled him out of saddle.

Blass had his gun out, cutting down at the lawman when Lorry's shaky shot spoiled his aim. He turned on the bitter-eyed kid, trying to steady his arm. Lorry's second shot sagged Blass into the mud. . . .

* * *

The wet leaves dripped around them as Peggy came to stand by her brother's side. The sun was painting the horizon clouds a deep pink.

"I was desperate," Lorry said, looking at Tex. "That's why I took that money out of Blass' office. The ranch is all Peg, an' I have, an' I didn't want to lose it—"

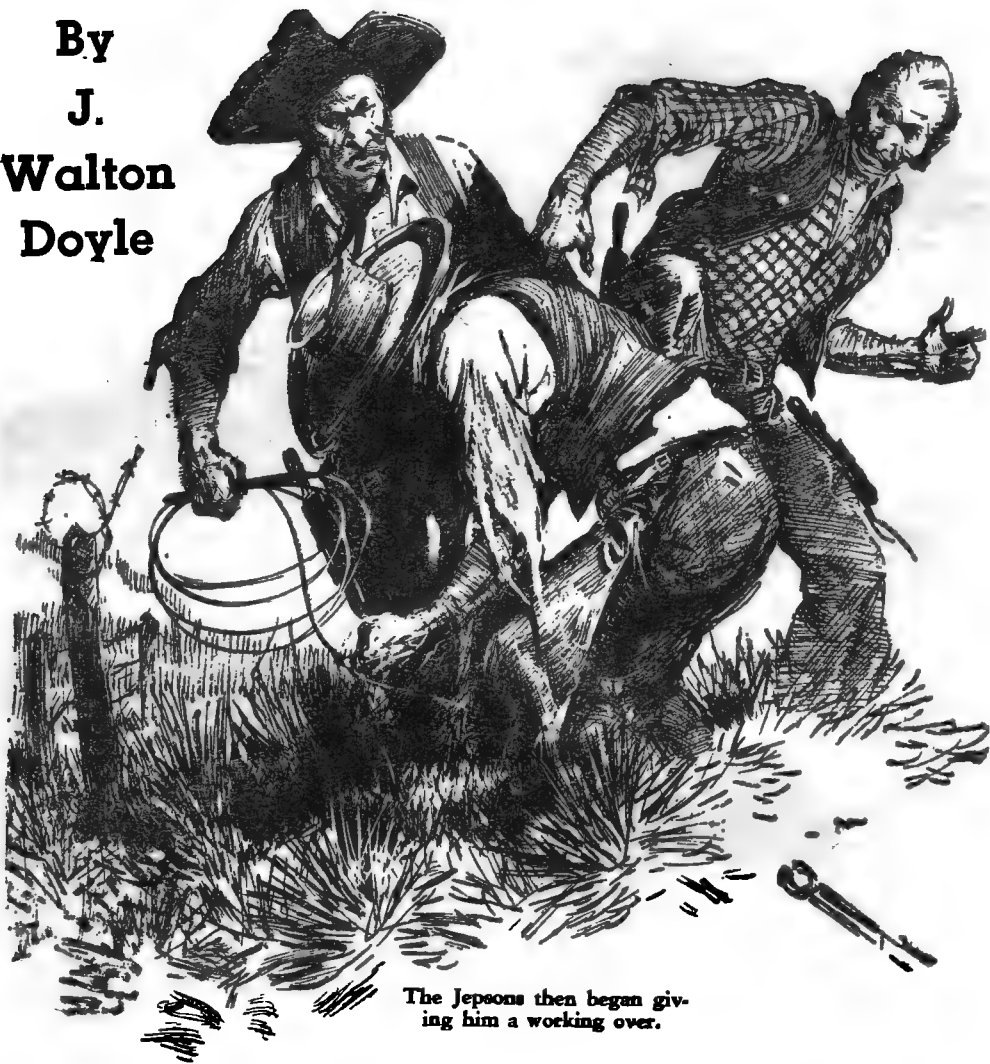
The lawman was bending over the gunman lying beside Mike's body. "This one will live," he said.

Peggy came to him as he turned. She looked small and helpless standing close to him. "Tex—" she began.

She didn't finish. He kissed her, not roughly, but definitely.

YELLOW BRAND OF HONOR

By
J.
Walton
Doyle



The Jepons then began giving him a working over.

His wife had said she would rather be a dead hero's widow than a coward's wife, and as the bone-smashing slugs of those gun-hung killers bit into him, Cary Anderson knew his wife was going to have her wish fulfilled.

INSIDE, the single room of the tar-paper shack was scrubbed to a bone-like cleanliness, but it was still a tar-paper shack, and hardly the place to bring a city-bred girl.

Cary Anderson was thinking of this as he sat at the breakfast table across from his bride, Bets. His eyes strayed

to her hands and he saw the tiny cracks running away from the knuckles, cracks that were oozing minute drops of blood, so badly chapped were the backs of her hands. Yet, when he looked up, her lips were curved up in a small smile, and behind the weariness in her pretty face was a quiet happiness, and he thought, *you lucky guy*.

But now she turned her head, glanced through the window. Still watching her face, he saw the smile leave her lips, the color seep from her cheeks. Automatically, his eyes swiveled, followed her gaze, and now he felt his own heart pick up a quick beat as a thin chill of apprehension came to him.

There was no mistaking the two approaching riders. And there was no mistaking that seeing them was the last thing he wanted. Yet, he got to his feet, saying, "You stay inside, hon," and turned toward the door. But as he turned, his eyes fell on his gun, hanging in its holster from a wall peg over the table. He hesitated momentarily, and Bets, seeing his indecision, jumped up, took the gun belt from the peg and held it out toward him.

He finished turning toward the door, then, avoiding her eyes and, shaking his head, said, "There's two of them. The quickest way for you to be a widow is for me to wear my gun." And he said it with what he hoped was a convincing tone. But it didn't convince him, for he realized at this moment that he was a coward. That he was afraid to face the Jepson brothers in a gunfight, and the thought was a bitter, degrading thing.

He opened the door now, and stepped through, stopped just outside, waiting, the foreboding growing within him.

THE JEPSON boys pulled their horses close by, their eyes resting on Cary with a look of truculence. Bart, the older, was a trifle heavier than his brother, Clax, but otherwise they were the same.

Tall, knobby men, with long, somber hollow-cheeked faces, and thin lips that weren't well muscled for smiling, and the thought came to Cary that they reminded him of a pair of buzzards he had seen the other day hovering over a dying calf.

They sat there eyeing him with that cold arrogance for so long that he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck wriggle, and it made him say uneasily, "Well. . . ."

Bart Jepson shook his head. "It ain't well, Anderson."

"I know that," Cary said flatly. "Or you wouldn't be here."

"Cocky, ain't you, pup?" Clax said menacingly.

Cary let that go by. He knew he was already on thin ice, or they wouldn't have come. And he knew, too, that the ice was getting thinner, for it wasn't hard to see either the meanness or the determination written in their scowling faces. Dryness was in his throat, and he swallowed at it futilely, and the dread grew with the passing seconds, seeming to push upward from his belly, making his breathing faster.

Now Bart slowly raised the short, wicked looking quirt, which he always carried thonged to his wrist, and pointed it at Cary. "We see you fenced in the waterhole."

"So" Cary said, trying desperately to make the word sound brave, but hearing it only as a dismal, quavery question.

But there wasn't need to say more. That had already been done, for when he had bought this spread four months back, he had found that his neighbors, these Jepson boys, here, had been using the waterhole. He wouldn't have minded if there had been water enough for all, but there was hardly enough for his own stock, so he had gone to them and asked them to stop it.

Unfriendly by nature, trouble-makers by choice, they had told him emphatically

to go to hell. Cary knew they resented his being here, his buying this little jag of land, for they had free use of the waterhole on it for many years, now, and they profanely told him they figured on continuing to use it.

And Cary had let them tell him that and curse him off their place and get away with it, not realizing that once a man starts crawfishing it can become a habit, a thing that will make his life a living hell. He knew that he should have had it out with them then, for once and all, but he hadn't.

Instead, he had taken what little nest egg he had saved—money that he intended to use to finish up the inside of the shack better, to buy Bets a new winter coat, to buy necessities they needed so badly—and had put it into barbed wire and fence posts and fenced in the waterhole. And all the time he was doing this, he made excuses to himself that this was the sensible way.

But now, with these two glaring at him, he knew he had been kidding himself, and Bart's next words added to this conviction, for he was saying, "So we cut the fence."

Still silent, Cary took this, as he had taken it the first time he had gone to them, and his silence ran on so long that Bart finally said, "What are you gonna do about *that*?"

Cary knew instantly what he meant, knew that Bart was trying to goad him to anger, to get him mad enough to strap on his gun, and he thought almost frantically, *I can't do it! I can't do it!* For fear had done its work, and now his mind was surfeited with but one thought. To put on his gun against these men was to die.

Slow-minded, and not a discerning man, Bart Jepson took Cary's silence for other than it was, and uneasiness vied for a place with anger in his eyes. But he was a man of action, unthought-out action, and

it made him swing down off his horse. He walked the few feet separating them with tense body, then stopped, only a pace away. He grabbed a handful of Cary's shirt front, jerked Cary toward him, so their faces were only inches apart.

"Talk, damn you! What are you gonna . ." He paused, a wicked grin coming to his thin lips, for now, standing close, he saw the fear-dilated, jumpy pupils of Cary's eyes, and the truth wormed its way into his slow-thinking mind.

CARY made no move to pull away, and Bart held him like that for perhaps twenty seconds. Then Bart let go of the shirt, but at the same time, shoved hard with clenched fist.

Cary stumbled backwards, tripping over one of his spurs. Off balance, he stumbled over the wash bench there against the wall, upset the water pail, and he could feel the cold wetness of it splash on his legs and run down inside one boot as he turned over, pushed himself up to a sitting position.

Feet widespread, a triumphant leer on his face, Bart stood there, calmly now, and rolled his cud of tobacco to one cheek, then, deliberately, he spat. And the spittle splattered an oblong, brown streak down the front of Cary's shirt.

"Yellow!" Bart said, and the one word was as full of scorn as any Cary had ever heard. But worse, he heard Bets' sharp gasp, and knew she was there in the doorway, and the bleak, gray shame of all this was scalding at his mind, amplifying the shrieking torment of fear.

Bart swung around then, went to his horse and got on, saying, "C'mon," to his brother, and they rode away without a backward glance.

Slowly, Cary got to his feet, stood watching them go, hating to turn around, hating to meet Bets's eyes, hating himself

more than he hated the Jepson brothers. Then Bets' voice came, asking the same question that was hammering at his own mind.

"What are you going to do?"

He took a slow, long breath, let it out just as slowly, then shrugged, still turned away from her. "Mend the fence," he said dully, and thought, *What else can I do?*

There was a long silence, and he could feel her eyes on his back, and sensed the accusation in them, for she must know now, as he did, that he was a coward. So when she said, "You could go to town and tell the sheriff," quick, unreasoning anger came to him, and he whirled on her, saying, "In this country, when someone tromps on your toes, you . . ." He meant to say, ". . . you hang a gun on you and have it out." But, instead, he ended weakly, ". . . you don't run to the sheriff."

She looked away quickly, said, "You know best," and moved back across the room and started to clear the table.

Yes, he thought bitterly, he knew best, but knowing and doing were two different things. This thought turned the anger from her to himself, and he grabbed up his hat and flung out of the shack, heading for the barn at a fast walk. He was rougher in saddling than was his usual way, but wasn't aware of it. After getting pliers, wire and a come-along he rode toward the waterhole, not looking back, for he knew Bets would be watching from the window.

The Jepson brothers had done a good job of ruining his fence. It was cut in half a dozen places, and the wires pulled back so their cattle could get through. Cursing, Cary got down, started pulling the slack ends of the wires together with the come-along, then joining them with bailing wire. He worked feverishly, using the physical effort as a temporary anesthesia for his harried mind.

It was mid-afternoon before he was finished, and then he stopped for a five

and a smoke before returning home. Sitting hunkered down on his heels, he had just raised the cigarette paper to his lips to moisten its edge when he saw them coming. Even at the distance they were, he knew it was the Jepson brothers, and he got to his feet, thinking, *well, this is it!*

WAITING, he watched them come on, and the dread grew in him until it seemed that his whole mind was given over to it. The brothers stopped only when they drew up next to the fence. Both of them eyed the taut wires, and the mended places, then their eyes came back to Cary, and Bart said thinly, "You don't learn easy, do you, Anderson?"

"The waterhole's mine," Cary said. "You can't keep me from . . ."

Bart's face darkened. "Can't we?" he broke in, then turned toward his brother, nodded. That was all. Then they were down and crawling over the fence.

They moved toward Cary warily, keeping abreast, and the dread in him turned to livid fear. He could feel it. Taste it. And with it came a leaden hopelessness, for he was in for a beating, and knew it, and he thought, *they have no right . . . they have no right. . . .* But he said, "You wouldn't try this if I had my gun on," and the words seemed thick and hard to say.

Bart laughed then, hardly cracking his thin lips to let the grating, humorless sound through. "But you *ain't* got it on," Clax said, and there was sneering implication in his tone.

And with the words, Clax lashed out, aiming a short-jabbing fist at Cary's chin. Self-preservation reflex made Cary jerk to one side. And this same reflex, not thought, made his fist ball, smash out.

His quick side-step caused Clax's blow to just graze his cheek, and when his own fist slammed into Clax's nose with a grinding, mashing sound, he was as surprised as Clax.

Clax yowled, and it was a wild animal-like sound, full of pain and rage, but no fear, and he came drilling back in at Cary, arms flailing.

For the briefest moment a small elation came to Cary as his fist smashed into Clax's face. But now, under this barrage of fists Clax drove at him, he backed away, threw up his hands in front of his face, knowing it was hopeless, for now Bart was moving in on him, too.

But his up-thrust hands had been too late. He saw the flash of movement from the corner of his eye, then sagged to his knees as something hard exploded alongside his ear, and he knew Bart had clipped him with the handle of his quirt.

He was but half conscious, yet aware of the rough hands that yanked him to his feet, pulled him along. And then he he felt the stinging bite of the barbs at wrist and ankle as they spread-eagled him and bound him to the fence.

The pain of the tiny, steel barbs was intense, and seemed to snap his mind out of the haze, but that pain was nothing to this new one that suddenly seared across his back, and he writhed away from it, knowing that Bart was using his quirt.

Again and again, he heard the sharp, deadly whistle as the quirt cut down, and again the terrible spasm of pain lashed out from his back and spread through his body. Finally, mind and body could stand no more, and he sagged, hanging limply from the fence wires. Only then did the devilish song of the quirt cease.

IT WAS the cool of the early darkness that revived him, and he found that he he was lying on the ground near the fence. It was a matter of minutes before he could stand, for each movement set new fires protesting through his welted back.

After a time, he walked slowly toward where he had tethered his horse earlier in the day, but saw that it was gone, and knew the Jepson's had turned it loose.

It was three miles, and he walked with pain dogging his steps, but only half aware of it, for the bitterness in him was a terrible thing, like an ever present and unwanted ghost, haunting his every thought, and he kept muttering, "Why didn't I wear my gun? Why didn't I wear my gun?" Yet knowing that if he had, he would have been afraid to use it.

And so it was with tortured mind and body, he finally neared the shack, and now he saw the lantern bobbing toward him. Then Bets came out of the darkness, dropping the lantern. Her arms went around him, and there was a sob in her voice as she cried, "Cary . . Cary! I've been afraid!"

But he knew it wasn't fear for herself, but for him, and he thought, *you don't deserve it*. Knowing this hurt the more, and, like a hurt child, he pulled away from her, said sharply, "Leave me alone. I'm all right." Then, as her arms dropped, he pushed on by her and went into the little shack.

Inside, he dropped into a chair, reached for the cigarette makings in his shirt pocket. As he poured the tobacco into the paper he noticed that his hands were shaking, and, looking up, he saw Bets standing in the doorway, watching, her eyes deep with worry and the soberness not becoming her pretty, young face.

He threw the making to the floor with and angry motion, looked away, and let his hands fall to his side, trying hard to still their trembling.

She went to him now, reached out and touched the blood-clotted gash on his forehead with tender fingers, then turned away without a word and took the kettle from the stove and poured water into the basin. As she bathed away the dried blood, she asked quietly, "What happened?"

He tried to laugh, but it was a jerky croak, and he quit trying. He said, "I better learn to ride, I guess."

Her hands stopped, one of them went to his shoulder, lay there, motionless. "Do you always tie the reins around the saddle horn before the horse throws you?"

"So," he said dully. "He came home?"

"Yes. I unsaddled him and put him in the corral. Now tell me, was it . . . ?"

"Yes," he burst out angrily. "It was. Both of them. Now what more do you want to know?"

"Nothing," she said softly. "Nothing." And her hands moved once more, working gently at the wound again.

BUT he knew there was more she wanted to know. Such things as if he would ever get over being a coward. If he would ever learn to stand on his legs and fight back like a man. But, knowing Bets, he knew she would never put these thoughts to words.

In silence, he ate the meal Bets fixed, not knowing what he ate, or caring. He waited until she had gone to bed, then blew out the light and undressed in the dark, ashamed to let her see his welts back.

At the breakfast table next morning, Bets said, "I think you ought to go see the sheriff." And when he started to shake his head, she added, "Do it for me, then, Cary, if not for yourself." And he thought, *she's losing faith in me*, and it made him snap, "All right! All right! If that's what you want."

He went out, then, not looking at her or kissing her goodbye, and rode toward town, dreading this errand, yet not knowing what else to do.

When he reached the meandering, dust-rutted end of the town's main street, he slowed the pace of his horse with a twitch of the reins. The heat of the sun had brought sweat, and he felt his shirt glued to his back, and shifted in the saddle, wriggling his shoulders to peel the garment away from the skin, for the sweat

salt burned like fire in the raw places Bart's quirt had left.

Suddenly, he knew he couldn't go through with this. Taking his troubles to the sheriff like a tattling school boy, because he didn't have nerve enough to handle them himself. With the humiliation of the thought, color darkened his already somber face, and he turned his horse around.

Reluctant to face Bets again, and the inevitable questions he could not answer, he took the long way home, thinking to ride by the waterhole and see how badly mutilated the Jepson boys had left his fence, this time.

He rode slowly, lost in dismal thought, and it was two hours before he turned from the wagon road to the faint trail that led over a low hill, then down into the valley where the water hole lay. It had rained in the early morning hours, and here the ground was still damp, and the tangy odor of sage and greasewood was heavy and sweet in the air. It was a good smell, and he wondered why he noticed.

Thinking these disconnected thoughts, he almost rode by the downed steer. It was lying on its side, the belly bloated, blackened tongue hanging out. He pulled his horse in, sat there looking down, a frown starting to build on his face.

In a moment, he climbed down, got to his knees beside the steer. Taking off one of the thin-skinned, leather gloves he wore, he put the hand on the steer's throat. When he got to his feet, near panic had pushed the frown from his face, and he threw himself into the saddle, rode on quickly.

It was only a minute until he pulled in his horse again. Nearby, three steers lay in a bunch, all very dead.

He went on again, slowly, this time, dreading, yet knowing, what he would find, and as he passed each dead steer, the leaden feeling in the pit of his stomach

grew heavier. He had reached the fence, and now he noted that it had not been cut, and knew why.

THE fence could be mended over and over; he could take repeated beatings, but, without cattle, he would have to give up and leave the ranch, and he thought, *the Jepson boys are in a hurry.*

He stopped his horse now, not wanting to go nearer the poisoned waterhole, for there would be nothing there but the dead and dying bodies of his stock. And as he sat there he was surprised that no danger came, then remembering, he muttered, "Cowards don't get mad."

He moistened his lips, then spoke to his horse, let it turn of its own accord and head toward home. When he rode into the barnyard he kept his head turned away from the shack, for he knew Bets would be waiting and watching from the window.

Getting down, he undid the cinch strap and pulled off the saddle. It was then that he noticed, and he stood dead still, letting the knowledge of his discovery sink in. Suddenly, he dropped the saddle, headed for the house on the run, for he had seen that the spring wagon was gone, and that meant but one thing. Bets was gone, too.

He pushed back the door, knowing what he would find, yet foolishly hoping he was wrong. The one room was neat and clean as ever, but above the smells of close living was the faint odor of Bets' favorite perfume. And in the far corner was an empty space that shouldn't have been empty. It was where Bets kept her small hand trunk.

The doorknob still in his hand, he saw all this with a sweeping glance. Then his eyes drifted toward the table. As he knew it would be, the note was there, propped up against the lamp.

He crossed the room without being aware of it, and his hand was unsteady as he reached for the piece of cheap note

paper and the writing blurred before his eyes a second before it stilled its moving. It read:

Cary,

I could stand being the widow of a brave man. But I can't stand being the wife of a coward. Try to forgive me for this, for I will always love you.

Bets.

He slumped down into a chair, his head in his hands, and thought, *well, there it is.* And it came to him that she hadn't really cared whether he saw the sheriff or not, but had used it as an excuse to get him out of the way.

As he sat there, misery in every line of his face and sag of his body, his eyes strayed to the gunbelt hanging over the table. He looked away quickly, as if it was a thing forbidden to his sight, then, after a moment, his eyes strayed back. This time, they held, and finally he rose slowly. And slowly his hand reached out, took the gunbelt from its peg.

He stood there holding it, looking at it dumbly, like a schoolboy with a new toy, and not quite sure how it worked. Then a scornful voice said, "You haven't the nerve!" and it startled him for a moment until he realized he was talking aloud.

He let his eyes drift away from the gun now, and the first thing he saw was the empty corner where Bets' trunk should be. Then the bed she had shared with him. And as his head swiveled slowly, his eyes saw all the things she had been partner to, and the misery in him became so big a thing it seemed he could no longer hold it.

"Better be dead, than alive like this," he said aloud, and was surprised to find his hands in agreement, for they were buckling the gunbelt to his middle.

THE Jepson brother's ranch house was six miles away, and he had plenty of time to think, plenty of time to be afraid,

and there were times when he came close to turning back. But he finally reached the place, and, nearing, he took off his gloves, for he wanted his hands free.

He had ridden to the rear of the house, and he stopped now, and wiped the palms of his hands along the front of his levis, for they felt sticky. He knew, too, that there was sweat on his face, for he tasted it as he licked his lips.

The ranch house was a sprawly, run-down affair, the yard full of odds and ends of junk and a smelly pile of hides off to one side. But he didn't notice this, for a woman came to the door, stood watching him silently.

Her face was shrewish, thin-lipped, and her dress filthy. She held back the screen door, better to see him, and pushed back a sagging strand of lank hair with her other hand.

"Where are they?" Cary asked, and found the words taut, curt.

"How should I know," she replied acidly. "They pay me little enough to keep house for them. Why should I bother with their whereabouts?"

Nervousness came to Cary. He had to get this done while his courage held out. "Didn't they say where they might be going?" he asked, and his tone was less curt, more entreating.

"Said they had some celebratin' to do. If that will help."

Cary said slowly. "Yes. Yes, that does help," and turned his horse and headed toward town, thinking that this was like them. Ruin a man's life, then celebrate the event. And now the anger came, bright and hot, and he could feel it burning away the fear.

* * *

This time, when he entered the main street of the town, he didn't slow his horse down, nor did he turn back as he had earlier in the day. As he was nearing Yeager's livery, it came to him that

there was no reason to take a chance on killing good horse flesh, and he checked his mount, turned it and rode up the plank ramp into the large, dim room. Here, he noticed the strong odor of animal ammonia, the smell of the animals themselves, and he remembered how he had often heard how a man notices small, inconsequential things like this just before he dies.

The livery keeper came toward him, saying, "Howdy, Cary. I'm gettin' a right smart bit of business from you Andersons today," and nodded his head sideways. Cary looked that way, saw his team, stalled side by side.

"She said you'd be after them. You want 'em now?" Yeager asked.

Cary shook his head. "No, not now. Take care of my horse for an hour or two, will you, Des?"

Des Yeager smiled knowingly. "Gonna do the town a mite while the missus is gone, eh?"

Cary said, "Yeah," heading for the door. But, friendly and talkative, Yeager followed, asked, "How long she be gone?"

"A few days," Cary said over his shoulder, wishing the man would go away.

But Yeager was persistent. He said, "Looked to me like she wasn't right happy about leavin' you for even a few days."

No, Cary thought dismally, she probably isn't happy. No woman would be to have her man let her down as he had. But he said, "I'll miss her, too." And that, he knew, was the truth, for his longing and want for her was a tormenting ache that was far worse than any physical pain could have been.

Yet, he wondered, how long would he miss her? This thought brought another: How final was death? And this bothered him, for it had never seemed important before, but now it was. Terribly important.

But now he pushed these thoughts away from him, went on down the ramp to the street, and the livery owner chuckled softly at his own thoughts and turned back to his work.

Here, on the boardwalk, Cary paused, hardly knowing which way to turn, for there were saloons both upstreet and down, and in one of them he would find the Jepson brothers. Standing thus, he was suddenly conscious of the weight of the gun against his thigh, and, somehow, it was a good feeling, like the gentle touch of a small, silent friend.

In a moment he turned upstreet, for it had occurred to him that the Blue Belle catered to the don't-give-a-damn trade, and would be the most likely place to find what he looked for.

The Blue Belle was a half-block away, but before he had covered a third of the distance he saw the batwings swing out. Two tall, knobby men came out onto the walk, and the sight of them set the blood tingling clear to the ends of his fingers.

A stab of the old fear came now, and one part of his mind shrieked for him to turn and run, the other part commanding him to stay.

The Jepson brothers seemed to be arguing, and Cary knew they hadn't seen him yet. Cary stood there hesitant, and in a moment he had fought down the urge to run. But the fear was still there as he moved on toward them slowly, and his legs felt stiff and unwieldy and the saliva in his mouth was like quinine.

Now he was close. Close enough to see Bart's long, lean jaw moving and hear the indistinct mumble of words and curses coming from his mouth. But still they didn't see him, and now they turned abruptly, headed across the street, still arguing heatedly.

Cary stepped from the walk, followed, his steps becoming quicker, and he was conscious now of the ache in his jaw from holding it so tightly clamped.

THE Jepson boys gained the farther walk, and Cary had closed the distance so he was but a few paces behind them, and as he stepped up to the walk, he said, not loud, but quick, "Bart! Clax!"

As if halted together with invisible lines, the Jepson boys stopped, their heads swinging around in unison. Cary saw the start of surprise in their eyes, then their bodies were turning to face him, Bart a bit quicker than his brother.

They eyed Cary silently, both very still. And while they were like this a gust of wind tore down the street, bringing quick dust and a hollow, dismal moan from the eaves of the building nearest them, and it was a sound that seared across Cary's raw nerves, stretching their tautness to a shrieking point, for its mournful tone matched the utter hopelessness in Cary's mind.

A slow, malicious grin spread Bart's lips slightly, and he said, "Look who's here!" Then his slitted eyes saw the gun at Cary's thigh, and he added, "Well I'll be damned!"

"And I hope you are," Cary said, surprised that the words came so easily, for his throat was so tight and dry that he could hear the fast air he was breathing off the top of his lungs.

The sneer on Bart's face turned to a snarl. His hand started a flashing, downward movement.

Cary's own hand moved then, feeling stiff and maddeningly slow. Yet he knew it was moving faster even than his mind, for now he felt his curled fingers meet the cold haft of his gun, and it was like the quick shock of touching ice. Yet, in the back of his mind, he knew that no matter how fast his draw, it wouldn't be fast enough. There were two of them.

But suddenly, in that latter half of a split second, wild elation came to him, for Bart's fingers slapped the leather of holster, raked along the gun handle, came up

three inches before he could check them, came up this distance empty, for the jouncing of today's ride to town had settled his gun snug in the holster, too snug for the quick draw he had tried to make.

Bart's hand checked, went back, tore the gun loose. But now Cary's gun was the up-swing, forefinger starting its death dealing flex, and hope was flooding through him again.

Then, as abruptly as it had come, the hope and elation were gone. In place was a terrible, chilling fear, and he screamed, "Bets . . . for God's sake . . . !" For she had just stepped from the doorway of the stage depot, and was standing almost directly behind Bart.

Cary knew a .45 slug can often drill right through a man and keep on going with killing power. Yet he knew that he dared not stay the motion of that forefinger and expect to live, and his fear for Bets was far greater than he had ever known for himself.

And it was this fear that made him deliberately swing his body away from Bart, swing it enough so that his gun lined on Clax.

Shots tore the silence then, echoes slamming back from the buildings across the street. Cary saw Clax's gun wink red-eyed death at him. But he knew Clax had missed, and that he would like another second, at least, for he felt his own gun jarring his arm, and Clax was falling sideways, dying as he fell.

Bets' scream filled the air now. High, terror-filled. And Cary saw her whirl and leap back into the sheltering doorway.

THEN it came, as he knew it would, first plucking at an ear lobe with a deathly whisper that followed the blast of Bart's gun. And again, before he could swing that way, it came. Only, this time, there was no warning whisper, but the feeling that he had been kicked by a horse.

Pain of unbelievable hurt came to the side of his head, but left instantly, followed by a curious numbness.

Yet he knew his gun was still befriending him, for he saw Bart stagger back against the building, grasp for a handhold that wasn't there, then slowly slide down the rough clapboard, blood gushing from his mouth.

Jubilance came then, but it was a weak thing, and he could not get the fingers of his mind to grasp it, for the numbness was gradually claiming his body, and his knees were reluctant to hold his weight. In a moment he let them have their way, and the ground was hard and unrelenting as it rose to meet him. Yet he felt no hurt, for he knew, now, that nothing, ever, could hurt him again. There was nothing more but blackness. .

He didn't know whether it was minutes or years, but he was suddenly aware of Bets' closeness then, for he smelled the illusively sweet odor of her perfume, felt her hands raise his head, felt the tears on his cheek, tears he knew were not his own. And her voice came now, taut with anxiety, yet overtoned with new, bright faith, crying, "Cary Cary! Speak to me!"

Then he heard the chuckling whiskey voice of the doc. "Don't worry, Bets, he'll come around."

And he did, saying gently, "You almost got what you wanted, Bets . . . I mean—what you said about bein' the widow of . . ."

"—A brave man," she whispered. "But I could do a better job being the wife of one. We both have another fight to make, Cary, and I can be of better help. For the doc says you're going to live; if you want to hard enough. . . ."

He smiled a little, and closed his eyes. "I won one fight today, Bets. And with your help I'll win this other one. . . ."

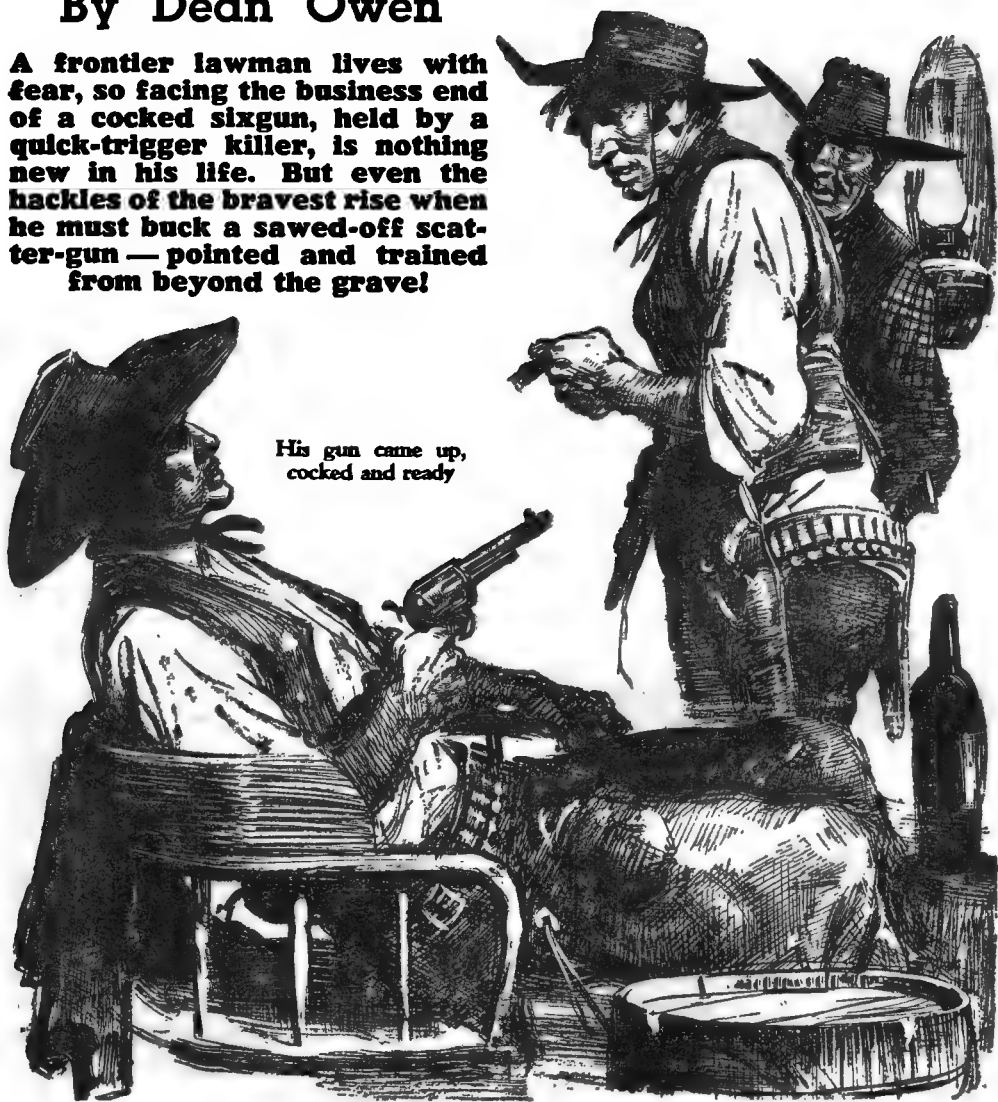
And Bets knew that Cary spoke truly.

HOWL TO THE MOON

By Dean Owen

A frontier lawman lives with fear, so facing the business end of a cocked sixgun, held by a quick-trigger killer, is nothing new in his life. But even the hackles of the bravest rise when he must buck a sawed-off scatter-gun — pointed and trained from beyond the grave!

His gun came up,
cocked and ready



WALKING into a gun trap where no human finger is on the trigger will raise the hair right up on the back of a man's neck. It happened that way to Sam Calliner, bringing a shine of cold sweat to his dark forehead, putting a hard lump in his belly. Fear, and why not? Here a man comes riding up in the twilight after a day in the saddle

crossing the Sink, and he sees the first spot of green in twelve blistering hours.

Sam Calliner's tongue was fuzzy and his horse needed water. He saw the stone shack built up against a solid cliff of black lava rock, with the willow and some green grass on the far side. There was a well there but Sam discovered it had a padlocked wooden cover.

Sam swore into the desert silence and started yelling for whoever owned this place to come out, but there was no answer. Off to the east the mountains were a hazy purple line and the Sink looked just as hot as it had all day, but now, at twilight, a desert chill was working into the heat. Sam's nerves were raw, and an ache spread over every inch of his big, six-foot frame.

The romantic notions he had as a kid about this kind of life had worn thin a long time ago. Each time it was like this, the strain of not knowing what you might have to face. And the uncertainty was a heavier burden each year. For there was Marge, with her warm smile, waiting for him. But if you kept at this sort of thing long enough, chances were some day you wouldn't come riding back.

Sam Calliner's horse, smelling the water, whinnied. That got Sam. He could stand it himself if a man wanted to lock up a well, but he wouldn't stand for it when his horse needed a drink.

He went around to the front of the shack. His agate blue eyes were red-rimmed from the brassy sun, his clothes powdered with alkali.

He knew how some of these fellows were who lived out here on the desert alone. They didn't like company and they'd stay hidden until you got tired and rode off. But Sam Calliner had no intention of moving on until he got water out of that well. There was no answer to his fist banging on the door.

A bulging strap of tin nailed to the shack door served as a handle, taped so it wouldn't cut your fingers. He was about to grab this and yank the door open when something moved in the scrub growth behind him.

Sam Callinger spun on a heel, his .44 sweeping up from a brush-scarred holster. Then he looked a little foolish, for looming not ten feet away in a clump of mesquite was a huge dog standing stiff-

legged, head down, watching him. The dog was old, Sam could tell that by the way his belly sagged, and the ancient scars on neck and right foreleg. His body was wolf gray, but the head, well, it was the biggest head Sam had ever seen on a dog. And he had long ears and mournful eyes. Somewhere down the line wolf strain and hound dog had got mixed up.

Sam liked dogs, but he didn't know whether this old boy was going to jump him or not. Backing along the side of the stone shack, Sam passed a small window partially covered by a burlap curtain. Upon glancing through that window he saw something that brought the hair up on the back of his neck, and he grunted as if he had been kicked in the stomach.

IN THAT empty room was the neatest murder trap you ever saw. There it was, a sawed-off shotgun tied to the leg of a heavy table. A cord ran from the trigger, under the table, then over the top, where it was fastened to the door by a heavy spike.

Sam Calliner's back felt wet and cold. Marge would have had a long wait if he'd touched that door. All the cuss words he had learned in his twenty-eight years of life along this border country came blasting out. Not only was the owner of this shack unfriendly to the extent of locking his well, he had also rigged up a trap that would kill a trespasser.

Suddenly he stiffened, for he had forgotten the dog. Now he saw that the old mutt had come out of the brush and was sitting on his haunches in the yard looking at him. Sam's horse, tired as he was, dipped his muzzle at the dog. The old mutt's tail began to wag. Keeping an eye on him Sam used a stone to knock the lock off the well cover. But the dog kept on wagging his bushy old tail and in a moment came over to sniff Sam's boots. Sam patted him on the head.

"Fella, I don't know your name, or

where you hail from, but you sure saved my bacon. If you hadn't come outa the brush when you did, I'd have opened that door."

He got a chunk of jerky from his saddle bags and tossed it to the dog. While the old boy worked on it with about three good teeth, Sam got a length of rope he had spotted and tied it to the door handle. Then making sure the dog and his horse were out of range, he stepped alongside the shack and pulled. The door flew open, instantly there was a roar inside the shack, and buckshot whistled out the opening.

That would prevent any other stranger from getting blasted if he tried to get in that door.

Even the shotgun roar brought no one to investigate, but Sam Calliner had the feeling he was being watched from the rimrock. Hell of a note, he thought, a man having a friendly old dog like this; a man who'd lock his well and set a gun trap.

When Sam and the horse had all the water he thought was good for them, after that long hot ride across the Sink, he pulled himself wearily into the saddle and rode down the trail.

This was harsh, sun-baked lava country, tough on man and horse. And the kind of people who lived here sure fitted in with the surroundings, Sam reflected. Why, even a man riding with a fast-shooting border gang, like the one that had been raising the devil over Salt Fork way, didn't take these chances. It was one thing coming up against a gent with a gun, but it was something else again to open a door, and by your own actions blow yourself to pieces. A shiver ran up his spine when he thought about his close call.

There was a place called Hanks Crossing up ahead and Sam figured it would be wise to stop there, get some grub, feed his horse and keep his ears open.

Hanks Crossing was a big, two-story frame building beside a corral and wind-

mill, set down in a hollow. The minute he got inside he had the feeling those three men drinking at the bar were expecting him. No lamps had been lighted yet, and it was dim in here after the comparative glow of twilight.

The man behind the bar he figured to be Goldy, who ran this place. Gold teeth gave him his name; his left ear looked as if sometime it had been worked on with a knife. Sam ordered a drink. He was tired and a little irritated at Goldy, who seemed to take an uncommon long time to fiddle with bottle and glass. Even then Goldy didn't set out a bottle like any friendly barkeep would do, but handed Sam a waterglass half filled.

As Sam stared at the healthy slug, Goldy said, "My customers like their drinks big, and often."

SAM CALLINER threw a coin on the bar and downed the drink. It almost lifted him out of his boots. He figured Goldy must have a still back in the brush some place, and after tasting this stuff he knew what happened to Goldy's three-year underwear and his old socks.

But anyhow, the liquor warmed him and he said, "Who lives at the stone shack down the trail? Damn unfriendly, I call him. Had his well padlocked and a shotgun welcome on his doormat."

Goldy didn't show much interest. He just stood behind the bar in the deep shadows, his fat arms folded.

A young fellow, not more than twenty-five, had detached himself from the bar to stare at Sam. Enough sunlight filtered through the dirty windows so Sam could see his clear gray eyes and blond hair. His outfit was expensive, whipcord, with silver on hatband and gunbelt. Smooth cheeks and a good mouth. But there was something about the eyes Sam didn't like. The man introduced himself as Perry Grant.

"You must be talking about old man

Kenshaw's place. Eccentric old cuss."

"He ain't eccentric," Sam said grimly, "he's sure enough crazy. A man riggin' a shotgun like that would have to be loco."

Grant's eyes were cool on Sam's face. He said calmly, "I reckon somebody's been rilin' the old man again. That right, Goldy?"

From the shadows behind the bar, Goldy said, "If you say so."

Sam Calliner felt his nerves crawl, wondering what he had stepped into here. For some reason he knew Goldy hated Grant's guts. But he had learned a long time ago in his business that it paid to give a man his head and let him talk.

"What trouble has Kenshaw been havin'?" he asked.

Jerry Grant said, "Somebody figures Kenshaw has made a strike and wants him out of the way. But I don't think the old buzzard could find gold in the U. S. mint. He rides over to Salt Fork ever once in a while and jaws some pilgrim into grubstakin' him."

"They say the crazy ones are the smart ones." Sam's legs were beginning to feel as if he carried a hundred pound chunk of lead on his broad shoulders, and he put a hand on the bar to steady himself. That ride across the Sink must have taken plenty out of him. And there was his horse out there in need of feed and a rub-down. . .

When he started to leave, sweat, cold and clammy, broke out on his body. He told Goldy he guessed he better have another drink. Goldy glanced at Perry Grant, and this time set a bottle out on the bar. Sam filled his glass.

Perry Grant said, "Kenshaw is crazy-smart. Why, I hear he even got Homer Kidd over at Salt Fork to grubstake him on this last go 'round. And Homer would sooner give blood than a dollar."

Sam Calliner tossed off his drink, and this time his stomach didn't feel as if it would drop out on the dirty floor. He

reckoned a man tired as he was could get used to any kind of drinking whiskey. But he had to hang onto the bar with both hands.

Perry Grant said, "Old man Kenshaw has to pack in his own water since it happened."

Sam Calliner's brain seemed to be filled with cotton and the thoughts he was trying to straighten out kept bumping into each other.

"Since what happened?" he heard himself ask, as if shouting down from the top of a mountain at Perry Grant.

"Why, since they poisoned his well."

The cold sweat really started popping out on Calliner now and he staggered weakly to a table, groped for a chair and dropped into it heavily.

Perry Grant's two companions turned around to watch. They were the hard-bitten type you might find in any place like this catering to men who rode the dim trails.

Perry Grant said with a smile, "Hell, man, you didn't drink any of that water, did you?"

Sam Calliner nodded and ran a tongue over his burning lips. "Yeah, I—I drank it."

"Why you think he had the well padlocked?"

Sam's head felt heavy and his neck didn't seem to be of much use in swinging it around. But he lifted his red-rimmed eyes to stare at Perry Grant through a curtain of blue smoke that seemed to be blowing into the barroom.

Perry Grant shook his handsome head. "Too late to save yourself now. Poison works fast."

SAM'S eyes wouldn't quite focus. His stomach was beginning to pain and a numbness seemed to be creeping over him. Not a pleasant thought, dying like this. Men like him, who spent their lives on the butt end of a gun, dreaded it. Much better

to take a bullet, or get kicked in the head by a horse, or fall off a cliff. But poison. Slow and agonizing.

Perry's eyes held an amused look. "Your face is gettin' gray."

For the first time Goldy spoke up from behind the bar. "For God's sake! Leave him alone!"

Grant whirled. "Shut up, Goldy! Or I'll get me some pliers and go to work on those teeth of yours. They'd look good strung on my watch chain."

The two men with Grant had turned to look at Goldy. The barkeep's face was inscrutable. Grant smiled down at Calliner. "I saw you cuttin' across the Sink today, and I wondered why you didn't wait till night. No wonder you wanted to get into old man Kenshaw's well. That sun dries the heart out of a man, don't it, Calliner?"

Sam lifted his aching head. "You know my name."

Grant teetered on his fancy stitched boots. "You were pointed out to me once down at the county seat. And I figure you rode over from Salt Fork to have a try at gettin' the bunch that's been shootin' up things around there." He laughed. "And here you are, and here we are. And you're dyin' and we're laughin', Mister Deputy Sheriff."

In spite of the numbness and the pain, Sam Calliner stared. This was a smooth one, this boy. If you had a sister, or were old enough to have a daughter, you'd feel good when a fellow like Grant came courtin'. If an artist was going to paint a picture of a nice young fellow with good moral fibre, he'd pick on Grant. That is, if he didn't get a look at those eyes. They were cruel, those eyes, and the brain behind them enjoyed watching a man suffer.

Grant turned his boyish smile on Sam. "Ever see a rattler after you've shot off his head? He'll twist and squirm and beat himself on the ground. That's what you'll be doing, Calliner, when the pain starts. You'll beg us to finish you."

From behind the bar, Goldy said nervously, "Lug him outside, Perry. I don't want him messin' up my place."

Perry Grant didn't look at the barkeep this time. He said, "I saw a Mex once that got hold of cyanide his girl put in his drink. I can hear him screamin' yet."

Cyanide! Calliner shivered. He couldn't tell whether it was getting darker because of the approaching night, or whether it was the poison making him blind. But one thing he knew: they weren't going to have the satisfaction of hearing him yell for mercy. Yes, he didn't doubt but that if the pain got too bad he'd beg them to kill him.

With all the strength left in his big frame, he suddenly lurched to his feet. And in the same swift movement his .44 came up cocked and ready.

It caught them flat-footed. Only an instant before he had been sagging in the chair. Perry Grant and his hard-faced companions lifted their hands. They looked a little nervous, as if afraid that a man in Calliner's condition might fumble that gun hammer; then somebody would have a slug right in the belly because that was the way the .44 was pointing.

"I'm walkin' out," Sam Calliner said hoarsely. "And if I got to die, I'd just as soon have company."

As he backed to the door he thought a kind of grudging admiration flashed across Goldy's fat face. But he couldn't be sure, and what difference did it make, anyway?

Jerry Grant said, "I'm bettin' we'll find him, come sunup, with his brains blowed out."

Sam never knew how he got in the saddle, or how he managed to twist around and keep an eye on those swing doors until a protective shoulder of lava rock hid him from the buliding.

The night had really dropped down like it does in the desert, and it was black

as the inside of a boot. A breeze whipped down from the caprock, knifing through his wet shirt and he hadn't gone a quarter of a mile before his teeth began to chatter.

He was thankful for the darkness when he finally dropped from the saddle, for it would make it hard for them to trail him. He sat with his back against a border, gun in hand.

All those plans he and Marge had made seemed so empty now. She had wanted to get married three years ago, but he insisted they wait till he got enough for a down payment on that ranch they had picked out. Well, a man never did seem to be able to get enough money together, not at eighty dollars a month as one of Sheriff Levering's deputies.

He gritted his teeth at the crawling pain. His hands shook so he could hardly lift his .44. This was the hardest thing of all, killing his horse. So far, the animal showed no signs of the poison, but he figured it took longer for the stuff to reach the vitals of a horse.

Now he had to use both thumbs to ear back the hammer. Just as got it in position the cramps hit him, and he fell over on his side, knees drawn up to his belly. This was a hell of a way to die, out here in the brush alone. .

THERE was no way he could tell how long he lay there, retching. One minute he seemed to be burning up with fever, the next chilled in every fibre of his body. Finally it was over and sudden relief from nausea left him weak. He did not question the miracle that had spared his life, it was enough that he still lived. His head ached with a horrible throbbing intensity, and his stomach muscles were sore to the touch.

The moon was up now. It would help him get out of this draw where he found himself. Then he was aware of horses moving on the trail below, and the mut-

ter of voices. Perry Grant cursing. But the night and the lack of sign on lava rock balked them. He didn't move until he heard them ride back in the direction of Hanks Crossing.

Then a boot cracked dry brush ahead, and he gripped his gun and waited. Into Sam Calliner's blurred line of vision came a gray-bearded old man. One gnarled hand gripped a rifle, the other held the muzzle of the big dog Sam had seen at the shack.

"Had to keep Mike from howlin' while Perry was around," the old man said with a wry grin, and released the dog. He jerked his head at a burro coming through the brush behind him. "Never could figure out whether it was Emma's brayin' that set Mike to howlin', or the other way around."

While Sam Calliner sat with .44 in hand, the old man built a small fire between two rocks, put a pot over the flames and dropped in some leaves he had taken from the burro's saddlebags. Soon a foul-smelling concoction was brewing.

Mike waddled over and gave Sam's cold hand an exploratory lick with his rough old tongue. Then he sat alongside and Sam rubbed him between the ears. Same lifted his eyes.

"You're Kenshaw."

The old man nodded, flames lighting his face, burned and scarred by desert sun. "I was listenin' outside the door when Perry was havin' his fun with you." He jerked his head at the brush. "Got your hoss for you too."

Sam growled, "Why didn't you put a poison sign on your well?"

"That water ain't poison. I covered the well so's Perry Grant wouldn't throw a skunk in there like he threatened."

Sam frowned. "Perry sure had me believin' I had a belly full of cyanide."

"They doped your drink. Perry just worked on your imagination. And don't feel bad 'cause you was taken in."

"He made a damn' fool outa me."

Kenshaw chuckled but there was bitter memory in his eyes. "Perry come by my place last month and offered me a drink outa his bottle. Perry ain't a man to insult, so I took a swig. He might as well have hit me with a crowbar. Last thing I remember was Perry standin' there laughin' till the tears rolled down his cheeks."

Sam's agate blue eyes darkened suddenly. "What about that shotgun trap you rigged?"

Soberly the old man said, "That was meant for me, son. If you hadn't got there first, I'd have come bustin' in that door like I always do and got blowed to hell."

"Who'd try to murder you?"

"Somebody figures I made a strike."

The old man had taken the pot off the fire and now he figured it was cool enough and passed it to Sam. It was squaw medicine, he said, and would settle Sam's stomach. The stuff tasted worse than that first drink at Hanks Crossing, but Sam began to feel better almost immediately.

When Kenshaw replaced the pot in Emma's saddle bags, the moth-eaten old burro nuzzled him then, showing her big yellow teeth, began to bray. Kenshaw clapped his hands over her muzzle and yelled at Sam to keep Mike from howling.

"Lordy, you can hear Mike ten mile on a windy day, and I don't want Grant to get curious what I'm doin' in the hills this time of night."

KENSHAW said, as he put out the fire, "Guess it was worth the ride across the Sink to find out that Perry is the boy who's been raidin' over around Salt Fork. That was smart work figurin' he was over here."

Sam Calliner stared through the moonlight at the old man, and raked his fingers slowly through Mike's scrubby fur. This

bunch had cleaned out the safe of the Ajax Saloon at Salt Fork, then returned three days later to rob the Mercantile. Everybody seemed to think this crew was from the border country. But instead of that, here they were holing up at a place called Hanks Crossing, thanks to Perry Grant strutting like a gamecock and shooting off his big mouth.

"I didn't come for Perry Grant," Sam told him.

Kenshaw's leathery face tightened. "Then who are you after?"

"You."

This was one of the times Sam hated his job, working for a sheriff who knew which side of the political fence held the votes.

Silence hung heavily in the draw. A breeze stirred the scrub growth.

Kenshaw said slowly, "Why you after me? Seems it would be more important to get Perry Grant."

Sam Calliner squirmed. "Sheriff Levering ain't forgot that Homer Kidd corals the votes for him at election time."

Kenshaw's white beard trembled in anger. "So Homer's the one put you up to this! Homer yells and the sheriff sends you, and says: 'after you get Kenshaw hogtied, why, if it ain't too much trouble, round up that robber gang!'"

"Now, look, Kenshaw—"

"Look nothin'. Here I stand watch while Perry Grant is beatin' the brush for you, 'cause I think you're a nice young feller and I didn't want to see Perry get you. And then I find you ain't after Perry at all! You're after me!"

Sam Calliner got to his feet, and his legs still felt as if they had no bone in them. "We best be ridin', Kenshaw."

As they rode silently down the moon-swept draw, a growing resentment against Sheriff Levering grew in Sam. For five years he had been a deputy and all he had saved was two hundred dollars; and that was what he had won last year at the

county rodeo. Marge had always said that sometime in life Opportunity came to every man. The main thing, she said, was to recognize it. Sam Calliner had begun to figure that Opportunity must have come by on a dark night when his back was turned.

Old man Kenshaw wanted to know what Sam intended doing with him, and Sam had to tell him there would be a sanity hearing before a judge. If Kenshaw was found to be insane, then Sam would have to take him to the asylum at Rocky Ridge.

Kenshaw snapped, "So that's what Homer figures. Put me in a nut house." He twisted around in Emma's saddle. "You think I'm crazy?"

Sam felt sorry for this old man. Homer Kidd, the cadaverous Salt Fork land agent, had been out of town when Sam arrived. But Sam had seen the broken windows in Kidd's house and the bullet holes beside the door. In his letter to the sheriff, Kidd claimed the old man had gone loco and tried to kill him. He was undoubtedly insane and should be locked up.

Sam said wearily, "Your talk is kind of loco, Kenshaw. How about Perry throwin' a skunk in your well, then riggin' a shotgun. It don't add up."

"The skunk was Perry's idea of fun. But that was before he decided to kill me."

"Why don't he just put a gun at your back and let go?"

"That ain't Perry's way of doin' things. I never seen a man get so much fun out of another feller's misery."

When they came to the main trail Calliner halted in the darkness and Kenshaw drew up on the burro beside him. Mike sat down on his haunches, his fuzzy old tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth.

Sam said, "Homer Kidd claims he grubstaked you and that when he refused to give you any more, you went loco."

Those clear old eyes were on Calliner's tight face. "He did grubstake me once, but that was seven years ago. But I never found ten cents worth of color on his money. When I had a big night at poker one time I paid him off."

"He's got a paper with your signature."

"Reckon it's the paper he claimed he lost. I was so glad to get shut of him I took his word."

"It don't make sense. First Kidd wants you locked up as crazy, then Grant tries to kill you."

Kenshaw tapped his hip pocket. "I got a copper claim worth plenty, and the assay report's right here. Homer got wind of it somehow, I reckon." loco."

IT WAS possible, all right, Sam figured, that Homer Kidd would try to use that old grubstake agreement to move in on the claim once Kenshaw was out of the way. Still. . . .

Kenshaw said, "I'm gittin' kind of bogged down with the years, and this copper claim'll need a young head. Now a feller like yourself—"

A picture of Marge and what she had said about opportunity flashed through Sam's mind. Then he set his lips stubbornly and said, "No bribes, Kenshaw."

"Ain't no bribe, son. Just business—"

Driving hoofbeats sounded off in the direction of the Sink, coming their way. Whoever it was didn't put much value on his neck, tearing along this dark and rocky trail that way.

Sam warned the old man to keep Emma quiet so she wouldn't start Mike to howling and tip off their whereabouts to this crazy, rocketing night-rider.

Back in the shadows, Sam glimpsed a tall, bony figure humped over a saddle horn. Then the rider was gone.

Kenshaw grunted in surprise. "Homer Kidd! First time he ever come this side of the Sink!"

Sam mounted his horse. "Kenshaw, I'm givin' you parole. Wait for me at your shack."

The old man protested, sensing his intentions, but Sam was adamant. "This is the law talkin'! Break your parole and I'll know for sure that you're crazy and oughta be locked up!"

Sam Salliner's horse showed a surprising recovery from that ride across the Sink, and he had to hold it to a trot. There wasn't much sense in what he proposed to do, but it would be sheer idiocy to announce his arrival by galloping up to Hanks Crossing.

Dismounting in back of the big two-story building, Sam drew his gun, found an open rear door and stepped into a narrow passage lined with beer bottles. As he moved up toward the barroom glow that showed through a ragged curtain, he carefully avoided the bottles.

When Sam peeked through that curtain he saw Perry Grant's two hard-faced companions being served by Goldy at the bar. Grant and cadaverous, black-hatted man, whom Sam guessed was Homer Kidd, had their heads together at a table.

Kidd was saying in a sepulchral voice, "You know I wouldn't ride out here this time of night, if it wasn't important. But I had to warn you about this deputy. He got in Salt Fork while I was out of town. When I came back I learned he had ridden this way."

Grant wasn't having as much fun as he had earlier in the evening. "Calliner's out cold back in the brush." He lifted his savage eyes to stare across the room. "Unless Goldy went light on that stuff in his drink. First time I ever seen a man stay on his feet after a slug of that dope."

Goldy, sitting on a stool behind the bar, licked his lips.

Kidd said, "Never mind that, Perry. I'm only interested in this deputy, and whether he found Kenshaw. I forgot to tell you I wrote Sheriff Levering to send

a deputy to get Kenshaw and arrange for a sanity hearing."

Perry Grant's hand flicked out, the fingers clamping on Kidd's bony wrist. "You mean Calliner didn't ride out here for me? That he come for old man Kenshaw?"

Kidd nodded, his thin face glistening with sweat. "Calliner was supposed to investigate the holdups after he arrested Kenshaw. But like I say, I didn't want him ridin' this way and bumping into you boys, without giving you warning."

Perry Grant said viciously, "Go on."

KIDD swallowed. "Why, I've got everybody in town thinkin' you boys hide across the border. Calliner will get tired chasing phantoms and return to the county seat." He laughed hollowly. "And I even put up two thousand dollars at the Mercantile, for your capture, Perry, so folks wouldn't connect us up. Isn't that something?"

Perry Grant released Kidd's wrist and gave him that boyish smile, but there was the devil in his eyes. "I'm glad I got a smart partner to figure things out like that. Yup, it'll be fifty-fifty right down the line for us."

Apprehension seemed to grip Kidd. Goldy and the pair at the bar were watching. Perry said, "We'll be rich, Homer. A copper claim oughta bring a fancy price."

Horror dawned in Kidd's eyes. "How'd you know about that?"

"I was listenin' outside your window when you had that talk with Kenshaw's assayer." Grant's grin widened. "That plan of yours to put Kenshaw in the nut house, is too complicated. My way is best. Kill him."

Homer Kidd seemed to wilt in his chair. "I—I'm through with you—"

"Maybe you'd like to have the sheriff know that Homer Kidd is the one that's tippin' us off when there's a safe full of

cash in Salt Fork. How about it?"

Kidd's face paled. Perry Grant laughed. "I figured up a little trap for Kenshaw, 'cause I believe if you got to kill a man, you might as well have some fun. There I was sittin' up on the ridge waitin' for Kenshaw to spring my trap, when this Calliner rides up and I figured to have some fun. Ever see a man who thinks he's dyin' of poison?"

Kidd's eyes were frantic. "No—no, I didn't—"

"It was funny, Homer. But it ain't funny now. I thought Calliner was lookin' for me and I told him everything." The back of Grant's hand smashed against Homer Kidd's cheek, sounding like the snap of bone in the silent barroom. "You better pray we find Calliner, and kill him."

He lurched to his feet, hunched over, feline fury working his face into a savage mask. "And you, Goldy. You better pray that Calliner's out cold. 'Cause if he ain't, we're goin' to have some fun with you. Some real fun. . . ."

SAM CALLINER started inching through that curtain as Perry Grant and his two companions wheeled for the door. Just as Sam was all set to yell for them to put up their hands, the silence was blown apart by a hair-raising sound that suddenly rent the air somewhere back of the building. It could have been a wail from the dead, a shrill sound that rasped across a man's nerves like a rusty hack-saw blade on old iron. And in there somewhere the howl of a dog and the bray of a jackass were all mixed up together.

Sam Calliner's reflexes carried him leaping to one side at that blast of sound, but he recovered a split second before Perry Grant and the pair up at the door. Homer Kidd was ducking under a table.

Then to the accompaniment of that din out back, guns began to send their roaring shock through the barroom. Sam knew

how slim his chances were with three muzzles hurling their fire at him. But the least he could do was get Perry Grant, kill that smiling devil before he could inflict his savagery on another human.

One of his bullets took the man on Grant's right. The man died on his feet. Sam was ducking, firing as he ran, to make himself as small a target as possible. Then he was conscious of another gun roaring out back. Grant's other companion went down.

Sam fired through the swirling powder-smoke right into Grant's dancing figure. He pumped shots until his gun was empty, and every bullet struck that swaying body on its way to the floor.

Old man Kenshaw was climbing through the back window, smoking rifle in hand, looking a bit shaken. There were three dead men by the door. Goldy's hands were raised, and he leaned over the bar and spat on Grant's body.

Kenshaw pulled a shaking Homer Kidd out from under the table and said, "Look what I found down where the cockroaches crawl."

Sam Calliner gave Kidd a hard grin. "In all the time I been a deputy, I never got a reward, but before I resign I'm collectin' that two thousand you put up with the Mercantile. Sort of a down payment on the future."

Homer Kidd was still shaking when Sam handcuffed him.

Mike came waddling in under the swing doors, his bushy old tail swinging from side to side. Kenshaw yelled at the big dog, "You and your howlin' almost got Sam killed!"

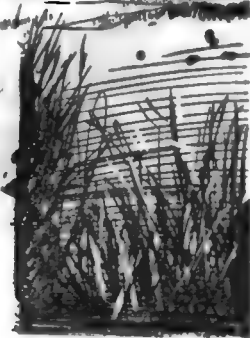
Sam shook his head. "It scared Perry and his boys more'n it did me, and threw off their shootin' eye." Sam told Goldy to rustle up the biggest steak he had in the place then added, "And work it over with a hammer, Goldy. Mike is shy of teeth."

WOHAW'S HUNGRY LOOP



That tequila-loaded saddle-bum, Wohaw Perkins, with that whole bunch of knot-headed punchers from Tailholt riding herd on him, decided the warmer climes of New Mexico were more to his liking Until he found his sanctuary guarded by a salty lawman who would set a thief to catch a thief—then gut-shoot one and hang the other!

Hell
For
Leather
Yarn
of the
Southwest



By
John H. Latham



CHAPTER ONE

Range-Hog Roundup

IT WAS the kind of mistake any man might make, Wohaw Perkins told himself defensively. Tequila, after a long dry spell, would leave a circuit-rider

color blind. Wohaw was no circuit-rider. But he'd downed a few too many in the Cibicu Saloon, back in Tailholt, Texas, and accidentally ridden off on the wrong horse.

Now that the switch had been called to his attention, Wohaw could see the bronc

he was straddling was a bay. His spavined old lump-jawed cayuse had been black as the battered Stetson on his head.

There were other things, too. Wohaw was riding a better saddle than he'd left in Tailholt—he'd noticed the handsome, hand-carved rig before entering the saloon. The brand on the bay's hip wasn't blotched, the way the black's had been. And this horse could show its heels to anything in the Trans-Pecos country.

It was doing it now. Wohaw glanced over his shoulder at the line of riders on his back trail. The bay had widened the gap to a quarter of a mile, and he could no longer count the buttons on Town Marshal John Shanks' barber-pole shirt.

Wohaw heaved a sigh of relief. It had been bad there, for the first few minutes of the chase. The marshal had shot a hole in Wohaw's hat, and clipped another slug so close it had gouged leather from his saddle swells. That whole bunch of knot-head punchers and saloon bums had been fanning lead after him as he rode out of town.

The fools! Did they think he was trying to steal the horse?

There was nothing further from Wohaw's mind. But a man couldn't do much explaining with a rope hand-knotted around his neck. He reckoned he'd better keep making fast tracks across the state line. It was only three miles from Tailholt to Chavez County, New Mexico, and legally the posse couldn't tail him any further.

But that wouldn't stop John Shanks, Wohaw knew. The salty old lawman would chase him through the gates of hell if he thought there was any chance of his laying hands on Wohaw!

"And it'd serve that high-handed jigger who owned this horse right," he decided, adamantly, "if I kept his danged ani-mule. Imagine a man getting so all-fired het up over a little ol' fool blunder like I pulled!"

Ahead of him a bleached buffalo skull was nailed to a post, marking the boundary between Texas and New Mexico. He

glanced behind him. One of the horsemen was spurring ahead in a desperate effort to overtake him before he reached the monument.

Wohaw touched the bay with his big Chihuahua rowels, and the splendid animal lunged ahead. The rider grunted his satisfaction. Then a rifle sent its thin report after him, and a bullet kicked up dust beside the trail.

"That does it," Wohaw swore, hotly. "Now I know I'll keep the horse!"

But he was grinning as he twisted in the saddle. Apparently the posse had given up the chase. The riders fanned out, shooting ineffectually after him. He imagined the wrath on John Shanks' long horse face, and the way the old lawman's white cow-horn mustaches quivered with anger.

He grinned even wider.

WOHAW liked this New Mexico country. For one thing, it would take the Tailholt marshal two or three days to get a warrant sworn out for him in Chavez County, and by then Wohaw could be up around Socorro or maybe as far as Albuquerque.

But the country had other good points. Yonder the high Guadalupes rose, blue and hazy against the sky. The red hills slid together in brushy folds, laced with game trails, and a little bunch of cattle grazed in a nearby draw. Wohaw reined in when he saw the sign:

This is Rocking-S range. If you need beef, shoot one.

S. Blair: Owner.

Wohaw had dropped his loop on more than one beef, without the owner's consent. The novelty of this appealed to him. And quitting Tailholt sudden-like, he was reminded that he hadn't pampered his innards with anything more substantial than *tequila* since supper last night.

In a matter of minutes, Wohaw had a fat yearling hanging from a live-oak tree.

He had a split-kindling fire going. He was busy with a skinning knife when a hard voice lunged at him from the brush.

"No, you don't, by God!"

So the posse hadn't given up the chase! Wohaw's heart gave a sick lurch and skidded into his boots as he turned.

But the man who had come noiselessly to the edge of the brush was a stranger. He was burly, thick-set, with a dirty yellow mustache and narrow eyes as frosty as broken bottle glass. His mouth was twisted in an ugly snarl.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What the hell you mean butcherin' a beef on this range?"

Wohaw wasn't wearing a gun. He was pretty well known in Texas, and lawmen had a habit of asking him to check his pistol the minute he hit a town. Insurance against trouble, they always said. He'd turned his gun over to Marshal John Shanks that morning, and in his hurry to leave he hadn't asked for it back.

But he could see the bulge of a heavy six-shooter under the stranger's soiled alpaca coat. He licked suddenly dry lips before answering.

"Why, I'm just drifting through," he said. He even managed a smile. "I rode up on a sign—"

"Sam Blair put up that sign," growled the big man, with a curse. "And letting jackleg saddle bums like you slaughter his stock is one reason he's losing the outfit. I'm taking over, first of the month."

"You mean," asked Wohaw, "that you don't own the range yet?"

"I will, pronto," rapped the other, moving in. "And I aim to teach the likes of you a-forehand that you can't butcher Ringo Savage's beef without—"

A knotted fist as big as the swell on a Sonora saddle suddenly lashed out at Wohaw. Savage had been so sure of himself that he hadn't bothered to draw his gun. That was a mistake. He was twice Wohaw's size, brutal and vicious. But

Wohaw had a whole bag of tricks, picked up in barroom brawls and his various encounters with the law, that Savage had never learned.

HE DUCKED under Savage's punch, letting it whistle over his head like a mule kick. Savage grunted with the effort. He was slow on his feet and running to fat, and his paunch bulged over the wide hand-carved leather belt that supported his sixgun.

Wohaw slid under a second roundhouse swing that almost scraped the ground on its way up, and slammed the big man's heavy midriff with his own knuckles. That first blow brought a sound out of Savage like air escaping a leaky bellows. Wohaw hit him again and Savage bent over, his breath rushing out of his lungs in an agonized gasp. He must have realized that he was up against a better man than he had suspected, for his hand clawed under his long coat-tail for his six-shooter.

Wohaw scooped up a handful of dirt and threw it in Savage's face. He knocked the gun out of Savage's grasp. While the big man pawed at his eyes, Wohaw picked up the gun and tossed it aside.

"You and me," he said pleasantly, "are a-going to rattle!"

Savage roared like a wounded bull, and charged in with both arms threshing. Wohaw stood his ground. He got a split lip and a bruised cheek in a matter of seconds, but he stopped Savage by pumping his fists into the man's heavy paunch with the fury of a drive shaft. He hit him in the face and bright blood spurted from Savage's nose. But his fists were still deadly, for a wild swing came out of nowhere to rattle Wohaw's teeth in his head.

Wohaw shook his head to clear it, but the rattle was still there. A chill hand seemed to grab his heart as he recognized the sound. It was the clatter of iron-shod hoofs on rock!

Somebody was coming down the trail

behind him, and it could be one of the posse or more likely a confederate of Savage's. Wohaw couldn't think of anybody in a day's hard ride who might side him.

He was in a tight. Raw panic held his throat as he lunged in, trying for a knock-out and a grab at the fallen gun before the rider came up behind him. He brought his knuckles up from his knees in a long, hard swing at Ringo Savage's head. The blow connected—and Wohaw thought for a moment he had broken his hand.

But the venom froze in Savage's wicked little eyes, and he was sliding down like a chunk of venison with the tie-rope cut. Wohaw spun on his heel. And if he'd closed his mouth right then, he would have bitten off the tip of his heart.

The rider was a girl. She had on ragged cowhide chaps and a brush-torn jumper. Hair the color of old wine showed under a sweat-stained hat. Her nose was peeling and there was a spray of freckles across her face. But Wohaw could see that she was slim and well-rounded and all soft woman under that rough garb. And as far as he was concerned, she was pretty enough to lay any other girl he'd ever seen in the shade.

The girl had a saddle gun across her lap, gripping the stock with one hand. She suddenly levelled the gun across the saddle swells and fired.

WOHAW jumped like he'd been rat-tlerbit. He let out a startled yell that was echoed by a scream of pain behind him. He whirled.

Ringo Savage had come to and crawled to his gun. Now he sat nursing bullet-smashed fingers, with the gun at his feet, looking as wilted as a corn-shuck tow-sack.

"Don't you know better'n to turn your back on a pole-cat?" the girl demanded of Wohaw. "If I hadn't shot that gun out of his hand, he'd likely have plugged you where your suspenders cross."

She looked at Savage. "Climb on your horse and ride out. You don't own the Rambling-S—yet. And Sam warned you once not to go stinkin' up our range a-fore you took over."

"You'll sing a different tune after the first," snarled Savage, white-lipped with fury. "I'll send Lulu Bell to—"

The girl thumbed the hammer of her Winchester to full cock. "*Git!*" she commanded.

Ringo Savage scrambled through the brush to his horse. They watched him ride over the hill, waving his clenched fist back at them in impotent anger.

CHAPTER TWO

Brush-Popper Bushwhack

THE GIRL looked at Wohaw, and he scuffed one boot uncomfortably in the dirt. He was lean as a split-rail, wearing brush-popper garb and an empty holster at his hip. He had never been handsome, in the first place. And with a two days' stubble of dusty beard on his face, and a bullet-hole in his hat, he knew he didn't look like the kind of man to be invited into a young lady's seminary.

But he hadn't forgotten how to smile in his wild years. He tried a grin on the girl and said, "I'm obliged to you, ma'am."

The grin didn't take. "Who are you?" she asked, her hard blue eyes moving to the skinning knife and the butchered beef and the burned-down fire. "Where you from, mister?"

"Why—Tailholt," said Wohaw, since that was the last town he'd been run out of. "And the handle is Perkins, ma'am, Wohaw Perkins." It wasn't likely the name would mean anything to her, here in New Mexico. It was better-known across the border, in Texas.

"*That horse!*" The girl was staring at the bay Wohaw had "borrowed" in Tailholt. "Why, that's John Shanks' Tumble-

weed horse! *He* sent you, thank God!"

Wohaw gaped at her. But the girl didn't seem to notice. There was a desperate eagerness in her voice as she went on. "Gee! We'd about given you up, mister. It's been two weeks since Sam talked to the marshal. He said then he'd send help, quick as he could, but. . . ."

The sentence trailed off into a kind of despairing silence, and her fingers tightened on the saddlehorn.

Wohaw had to spill half a sack of tobacco in a brown paper before he could make his trembling fingers shape a cigarette. *So the bay belonged to the Tailholt marshal!* Wohaw's blood turned to ice water, freezing his veins, but the girl didn't seem to notice the shakiness of his voice.

"The marshal was a-hurryin' me some," he finally said. "But he never told me nothin' about—"

"About what you'd be up against?" The girl gave a bitter laugh. "Well, if John Shanks hadn't hand-picked you, I'd say you would be a fool to stay. Sam has been crippled, since he talked to the marshal. He was trailing a little bunch of stolen cattle, and somebody holed-up on the rim of Devil's Canyon shot him out of the saddle. He's laid up with a broken leg."

She stared woodenly at Wohaw. "I'll give you the straight facts, mister. There isn't much you can do now. Our range is about clean. Ringo Savage is demanding his money, or the outfit, by the first. We haven't got a rider left. And it would take a miracle to pull the Rambling-S through!"

Wohaw was in a quandary. The girl had mistaken him for someone else—and he couldn't correct her without tipping his hand as to how he'd come by the horse. Sympathy squeezed his heart the way a cow camp cook squeezes a dish-rag. The girl was pretty enough to make any man tackle hell with a bucket of muddy water.

But Wohaw had no intention of getting

mixed up in a fight between the Rambling-S and Ringo Savage. Any fool could see that Savage held all the aces—and Wohaw never played against a stacked deck. When he took a hand in a game, he liked to rig the deal himself.

And there was Marshal John Shanks. It was just a whoop and a holler across the state line to Tailholt, and that crusty old lawman would be hot on his heels with a warrant for horse-stealing quick as he could contact the proper New Mexico authorities. If Wohaw hung around this locale very long, he'd be doing it literally—from a live-oak limb with several feet of empty air under him.

He shuddered at the thought.

"I'd surely like to help you, ma'am," he said earnestly. "But I've got some unfinished business up Socorro way. And the marshal didn't—"

THE sudden, knowing contempt in her eyes made him wince. "I guess it's too much to expect of any man," she said, slowly. "We've had three hands coyote on us since Ringo Savage's gun crew started shooting into the bunkhouse at night, and taking pot shots at men riding the range. But we had hoped the man Shanks sent—"

She bit her lip and looked away. When she spoke again, there was strained anxiety in her voice.

"But I'd take it kindly, mister, if you'd ride on to the Rambling-S with me and have a look-see at Sam. He's running a high fever, and we can't get a doctor for him. I think Ringo Savage warned the one in Pensacal to stay away. And if Sam gets any worse, somebody will have to take him to either Tailholt or Las Cruces in the bed-wagon.

"If you think he has to be moved, mister, I'd pay you for the trip. With both of us away, Savage and his men would likely burn us out. He'd do that just to make sure we had to leave."

Wohaw felt like dirt under her feet. He wanted to say she'd just hired herself a fighting man, but he couldn't—without sticking his long neck in a hang-noose! He looked at her again, and saw her lip quivering, and reckoned he could at least ride with her to the Rambling-S and see how her father was doing. He'd still have a head start on the Tailholt marshal.

"All right, ma'am," he said, with a smile meant to evaporate her troubles. "I'll go with you. And don't you fret your pretty head for a minute more. Doc. Perkins knows all there is to know about lead and rattlesnake bites!"

The girl didn't smile back, and Wohaw's own grin faltered as he stooped to pick up Ringo Savage's sixgun and check the loads in it. He slid the gun in his holster and loaded the beef on behind his saddle.

"Ain't no sense a-wastin' it," he remarked.

The girl looked at him, and he knew what she was thinking. In her eyes he was the kind of low, crawling thing that would help himself to fresh meat on their range, and then ride out when he found they were in a tight.

He was red-faced and cursing to himself as he followed her up the trail. . . .

* * *

It was a two-bit layout, and Wohaw wondered why Ringo Savage even bothered about it. There was a two-room 'dobe' shack, a small bunkhouse, and a saddle shed. A few lean hogs rooted around a seep spring in the draw nearby. A bed-wagon was drawn up in the yard and a saddled horse stood hip-shot in the pole corral.

"Sam's horse," said the girl, tight-lipped. "I haven't had a chance to unsaddle it since he made it in last night."

Sam Blair was a dried-up, scrawny little old cowman running to suttly-gray face hair and warped legs bowed like a

saddle tree. He lay on a bunk in the front room of the shack, with one leg, swathed in blood-soaked bandages, propped up on a pile of quilts.

His faded eyes were seared with pain, but he managed a weak grin and held out a gnarled, brush-scabbed hand for Wohaw to shake.

"So you finally made it!" he exulted. "Ain't no use in me askin' who you are. Minute I seed you riding that Tumbleweed horse alongside Cheryl, I said to myself, 'Sam, that's the young hellion John Shanks set to give you a hand.' I said, 'Bless that boy and the Tailholt marshal too.'"

"Hang your hat on the bed post, son. Pull up a chair and set. I know you're empty as a gutted snowbird, after that ride, but Cheryl will whip up a batch of her hot biscuits will melt like butter in your mouth!"

"He ain't a-staying, pa!" said Cheryl Blair, flatly.

"*Ain't a-staying?*" Sam Blair's voice was quiet enough, but the glad look died in his eyes. He suddenly seemed ten years older, and his shoulders sagged a little. He looked at Wohaw, and then out of the window.

"Well, he's a-stayin' for supper, at least, daughter. The Rambling-S ain't never turned nobody away at grub time. Just you whip up them biscuits, like I told you."

WOHAW stayed for supper, but he felt about as welcome as a skunk at an open-air revival. He liked Sam Blair's looks and he liked his daughter, and from that sign he'd seen on the range, he'd bet neither of them was the kind to count biscuits on a hungry man.

But long as he'd been without woman-cooked food, the biscuits nearly gagged Wohaw. Maybe it was listening to old Sam's slow, labored breathing in the next room. Maybe it was the girl, and her

stony stare. Cheryl Blair's manner somehow reminded Wohaw of a pup that's been whipped off the place and hasn't a friend left in the world.

He studied her covertly. She was pretty enough to put in a picture frame and set on a man's mantle, just to admire, he told himself. She was the kind of girl he'd been looking for all of his life. He'd ridden more than his share of the dim trails and smelled a lot of powder-smoke. It had been a long time since a girl like Cheryl Blair had smiled at him, and meant it.

Wohaw's thoughts ran back over the beak, lonely years, and he knew a sudden bitter longing for the warm companionship he'd missed along the way. Take this little old greasy-sack spread, for instance. It wouldn't ever amount to a hill of beans, but a man could make a comfortable living out of it. He could have friends and neighbors. And if the law didn't hound him, maybe some day Cheryl Blair would . . .

Wohaw remembered the bay horse in the corral, and the fact that it belonged to the Tailholt marshal. Something as cold and shivery as a snake's belly crawled up his spine. He shoved back his plate, leaving a big hole in his middle and several biscuits and a slice of roast venison untouched.

"I'll go to the corral with you," said Cheryl. When they were away from the house, she stopped him.

"How do you—think Sam—is making out?" she asked, hesitantly.

Wohaw couldn't meet her glance. "Not so good. He might pull through—if this other thing wasn't worrying him."

The girl's mouth tightened, but she said nothing as she watched Wohaw lead the bay horse out of the corral. He slipped the bits in Tumbleweed's mouth and took the slack out of the cinch. The girl kept watching him, and gradually that look got under Wohaw's skin.

"Hell's fire woman!" he suddenly exploded. "Quit sizing me up like I was something the cats drug in and the dogs wouldn't have! What could a picayune little old cowhand like me do ag'in Savage and his gun-slicks? I'm just one man. I ain't an army!"

It was a big speech, but it didn't help much. He knew what she was thinking. If he rode on over the hill, he might as well be in cahoots with Ringo Savage. He'd be helping kill her father.

"I—I'm sorry, Mr. Perkins," she faltered. "I guess I just expected—too much. I know it isn't really your affair." She gave him a wan smile. "Well, good-bye."

The smile did it. Wohaw took his foot out of the stirrup. "Why don't you tell me about it," he suggested.

"It wouldn't do any good," she said hopelessly.

But she told him, anyway. Talking seemed to help, for the words were soon tumbling out so fast he could barely keep track of them.

AS NEAR as Wohaw could figure, Ringo Savage considered himself a big wolf and needed a lot of country to howl in. New Mexico was a territory, and unorganized, so there wasn't any local law the little outfits could call in. Savage had gobbled up all of the range around them. Sam Blair still owned the Rambling-S—by the skin of his teeth. But Savage had a mortgage on the spread, and come the first of the month he'd be taking over.

To keep Blair from paying off, Savage had hired a renegade named Lulu Bell to whittle his herd down to size. Cheryl figured it was Lulu Bell, or one of his men, who'd shot her father. She said there were still enough cattle left on the range to pay off the mortgage, but Savage had scared off all their riders and they had no one to help them make a beef drag.

"How about the other little outfits?"

asked Wohaw. "Couldn't you all pitch in together and hold a gatherment of some kind?"

"There's none left," she said bitterly. "They even run old Juan Archuleta off his goat graze. He's living in an abandoned line camp at Indian Springs with his two grown sons. That's west of here, on our land."

"No cow savvy?"

"No cow savvy," said Cheryl, and smiled in spite of herself. "I'm not sure that Juan or either of his boys, Bueno or Fresco, could herd a bunch of cattle down a lane with barbwire fences on either side!"

Wohaw checked Tumbleweed's cinch again. "Well," he said. "Reckon I better be drifting. Thanks for the supper, Miss Blair, 'twas fine."

"You're welcome," said Cheryl. "So long."

"So long."

* * *

He mounted and loped away. When he topped the first rise, he looked back and saw her still standing near the corral gate. There was a forlorn droop to her shoulders. Her head was bent down. He would have bet his new horse and fancy rig that she was quietly, hopelessly crying. His supper suddenly didn't sit right.

There was a tight, hard set to Wohaw's mouth as he rode on. As Tumbleweed jogged along the trail, he had a talk with himself.

"Wohaw, you ain't very wide between the horns. Sho' that little chickadee is purty! She'd make any whickerbill feel like letting his spurs out to the town notch and yodeling. But it's rattle your hocks out of here or wind up a permanent decoration on hang-tree!"

The talk did little good. He was still arguing with himself as he rode up to Indian Springs.

CHAPTER THREE

Goat Herder Rebellion

THE springs were in a shallow, winding canyon angling down from the higher Guadalupe. There was a half-dugout and a mesquite-pole pen, and a little horse trap enclosed on three sides by a brushy basin.

A horse whickered as Wohaw rode up. Smoke curled from the rusty stovepipe and an ancient, leathery Mexican came to the door.

The Mexican had a Winchester in his brown hands. He did not ask Wohaw to light and rest his saddle, as was the custom of his race, and that single omission told an eloquent story. In the past, when Wohaw had needed a bait of grub or a quick change of horses, he had always found the Mexicans a most hospitable people.

"*Buenos tardes, amigo,*" he called.

"What do you want here?" demanded the old one, harshly. The Winchester was aimed at Wohaw's lean middle, and he had the feeling that he was being watched over the sights of two other guns. Bueno and Fresco were close by in the brush, he was sure.

"I'm a stranger in the country," he told the *anciano*. "I just rode over from Sam Blair's place. I'm looking for some cattle to steal."

"Then you are looking for that son of a buzzard, Ringo Savage!" said the Mexican, and now his voice was as ugly as the click of the Winchester as it was drawn to full cock. "You have come to the wrong place to find your thieving compadres, *senor!*"

"You got me wrong, old-timer," smiled Wohaw. "I said I'd just come from Sam Blair's. I hanker to steal some cattle *back* from Ringo Savage!"

A light dawned in the old Mexican's faded eyes. He put down the Winchester. "Come into my house, *senor,*" he said hospitably. "I should have known you

were not an outlaw. You have an honest face."

Wohaw grinned to himself as he dismounted. He wished old Juan would tell that to a certain bunch of Texas lawmen!

Archuleta's two sons, Bueno and Fresco, came out of the brush. They were on either side of twenty, but as alike as two mesquite beans from the same pod. On a reasonably clear day Wohaw reckoned he might tell them apart.

In the summer months, when the foothills are dry, *cabreros* take their goats high into the mountains. Wohaw had guessed right when he figured Juan Archuleta and his sons would know almost as much about Ringo Savage's business as the rancher himself. That was why Savage had run the family off its little goat graze. From the high saddles around Guadalupe Peak, they could watch any movement of cattle, and Savage would be the kind to want his movements obscured.

With a ramrod, the *anciano* drew a map of the country on the hard-packed 'dobe floor of the dugout. He named the water-holes. He traced the trail to the railhead at Pensacal, where most of the cattle from the Guadalupees were driven to market.

"But Ringo Savage owns the town, *senor*," he cautioned, "just as he owns the country. It would be best to trail-herd here."

He pointed out Las Flores, a little town between El Paso and Las Cruces. "It is dry trailing," he said. "but I have driven goats over it many times."

The Mexican located Savage's headquarters and Sam Blair's little place on the map. He showed Wohaw where his own cabin had been, before Savage burned him out. A crooked line indicated Devil's Canyon, and a shorter scratch a box canyon where the three *cabreros* had, on certain days following cattle raids in the country, seen boiling dust.

"But it is well-guarded, *senor*," he warned. "It is within five miles of the

main ranch, and Lulu Bell and his renegades hole up somewhere near there. Besides, a man standing on Coyote Rock—" He indicated a spot near Devil's Canyon, "—can see the ranchhouse. If anything goes wrong, he can attract the rest of Savage's riders.

"He can, huh?"

* * *

Wohaw mulled that over. He had been doing a lot of figuring since leaving the Rambling-S. The way he looked at it, a good cattle drive would pull Sam Blair out of the hole. There wasn't time, nor men, to hold a round-up on the range, but Ringo Savage had done that for them and was conveniently holding a bunch of Blair's cattle near Devil's Canyon.

Savage planned to sell them after he took over the Rambling-S, but Wohaw had it in his head to steal a jump on the crooked rancher. It would be a novelty, stealing cattle for instead of from the rightful owner.

It followed that if a lookout on Coyote Rock could attract attention at the ranchhouse, the system would work in reverse. Wohaw decided to pay a visit to Savage's layout. The simplicity of it amazed him. He reckoned he could do a better job of this than any man John Shanks could have sent. He could out-crook any crook in the country.

But memory of the Tailholt marshal brought to mind the risk he was running, and cold sweat cracked through his skin.

"They could hand-pick every cow camp in Texas," he told himself as he rode off with the Archuletas just after sundown, "and not find a thing on two feet as bird-brained as you, Wohaw Perkins!"

THE ICY dread that clutched his heart had nothing to do with the fact that it was full dark, and he and Bueno and Fresco were crawling through a hayfield

toward the scattered buildings that made up Ringo Savage's ranch headquarters. Old Juan was back in a draw well away from the place, guarding the horses, and Wohaw wished he was in the saddle and getting the hell out of there. He'd keep fooling around until that marshal laid hands on him, sure as shooting!

But in his mind's eye he could see Cheryl Blair back at the Rambling-S corral, with a forlorn droop to her shoulders and her head down to hide her tears. He cursed himself for a hollow-horned idiot and crawled on.

Summer hay had been ricked in long stacks in the field, and Wohaw decided they would do. He whispered terse instruction to Bueno and Fresco. They slipped away into the night. Wohaw waited while a man might have smoked a cigarette down to his fingers, his nerves getting jumpier all the time, then set fire to the stack nearest him.

Immediately he saw a second blaze, shielded from the house, that marked a fire started by either Bueno or Fresco. One of the boys crawled back.

"Good work, Bueno!" he said.

"I'm Fresco," answered the boy, and Wohaw waited in growing apprehension as the minutes ticked by and the second of old Juan's sons failed to return. Then he saw the reason why. Bueno had really entered into the spirit of the venture. He had set fire to two more stacks, and while they watched a tongue of flame showed behind the main barn.

If that fire got any headway, Ringo Savage would be burned out as clean as he'd burned the Archuletas!

Bueno came back, his grin wicked to see in the leaping firelight that now engulfed the nearest hay stack.

"Let's go!" said Wohaw, and set off at a spur-clanking run toward the draw where the horses were hidden. The boys, in their flat-soled *huarachas*, passed him with little effort. When it came to foot-

work, Wohaw was about as handy as he was in the Methodist minister's wife's parlor.

The barn was blazing as they rode out of the draw, and Wohaw could see men dashing out of the bunkhouse into the fire's red glow. He could hear faint shouts. He grinned as he touched Tumbleweed with spurs and turned into the foothills toward Devil's Canyon. A little flurry of shots sounded behind them, but no lead came close.

"That'll be a signal to the lookout on Coyote Rock," he told the *cabrer*os. "We'll pull off the trail and wait around a spell."

Waiting brought to mind other nights when he'd run wet cattle both ways across the Rio Grande, and holed up to dodge Rurales and Rangers in the Texas and Tamaulipas brush. The lawmen he'd seen on those excursions had been over the sights of six-shooter and saddle gun, and it was a novelty to realize he was working on the same side of the fence with the Tailholt marshal.

He winced. Old Juan Archuleta was using a rope hackamore, and the horse jerked its head and rubbed the rope against the saddlehorn. The sound reminded Wohaw of the scrape of a hang-rope across a live-oak limb, with him kicking at the end of it. He wiped sweat from his ashen face with shaky fingers.

Then the hard pound of hoofs on the rocky trail came to his ear, and all of that was forgotten as a body of horsemen swept by. Wohaw counted seven men in the hard-riding bunch, silhouetted against the sky. He waited until their rapid run had diminished in the direction of the ranchhouse, then turned again up the trail.

THE MOON was up when they reached Devil's Canyon. But Bueno and Fresco, as old Juan put it, could walk over a sleeping bear at night without it missing a snore. They scouted on foot, and soon reported the cattle were unguarded.

Shortly, they had the herd strung out down the canyon. There was a full five hundred head in the bunch, Wohaw knew, and he didn't think Sam Blair had ever owned that many cattle. The surplus must be in Savage's iron. Wohaw didn't let that bother him for an instant. If Sam Blair objected to selling another man's cattle—even a man who was trying to rob and break him—Wohaw would just pocket that profit himself.

Cheryl had been wrong about the *cabreros*. Maybe they didn't have a lot of cow savvy, but they got the herd into the main canyon in record time and whooped and hollered to haze it along. Wohaw crowded the stragglers hard, whacking recalcitrant ones across the rump with a doubled catch-rope, for he wanted to be long gone from there when Lulu Bell and his renegade crew returned.

He'd heard plenty about Lulu Bell down Texas way.

But they had an easy time of it, pointing the herd through the mouth of the canyon and out along the flat, high plain toward Las Flores. That was what worried Wohaw. It was *too* easy. A gnawing doubt laid hold of his mind and worried it the way a coon worries a chicken bone in its den.

When the herd was seemingly trail-broke, he turned it over to the Archuletas. He prodded Tumbleweed with spurs and rode hard for the Rambling-S, with that feeling of growing uneasiness crowding up on his heels. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Sixgun Soiree

SOMETHING was wrong. Wohaw knew that the minute he saw the house standing ominously dark in the flat wash of moonlight. Guns were whanging as he rode up on the little rise from where he'd last seen Cheryl Blair. Quick, bright-hot

streaks of flame flared and faded in the night. Answering gunfire sounded from the house. The way it looked to Wohaw, at least fifteen men were out in the brush surrounding the Blair place, hammering at the thick-walled 'dobe shack with the sound of a besieging army.

And Cheryl was in that shack! The thought was enough to freeze Wohaw's blood in his veins. He waited, and relief was like a chill wind blowing against the sweaty heat of his face when he spotted answering fire from both windows.

The girl and old Sam were both alive, but that didn't make him feel much better. He knew they couldn't hold out long, and he'd gotten them into this jackpot. He'd been too narrow between the horns to figure this far ahead. He should have known that Ringo Savage wasn't the kind to take a licking laying down!

Wohaw cursed himself for the biggest lame-brained idiot that'd ever run a sandy on a snake like Ringo Savage and had it blow up in his face. He'd been hid under a washtub, he reckoned, when the brains were handed out.

But the fat was in the fire now, and he had to have help from somewhere. He couldn't tackle that renegade bunch alone. He considered riding after the Archuletas, but even with three additional men he couldn't break through the ring of guns Ringo Savage had thrown around the Rambling-S.

With sick, raw panic inside him, he asked himself where he could find enough fighting men to handle this buckwhacking crew. The answer, when it came, was like a mule kick in the belly.

Tailholt was the nearest town. He could raise a posse there. *Trouble was, that posse would be hot under the collar to hang him for horse-stealing!*

* * *

It was a hard decision to make, but Wo-

haw headed for Tailholt. He knew he could never look himself in the face in a shaving mirror again if he rode off and left old Sam and his daughter at the mercy of Ringo Savage and his gang. And the dim trails wouldn't miss one more drifter with snake tracks in his back trail and a price on his head, he reminded himself bitterly.

Still, his heart was in his throat as he rode into Tailholt on the town marshal's stolen horse. It was like striking a match to a powder keg, then going back to see if it would blow up.

Only one saloon was open at this late hour. Three horses stood at the hitch-rail in front of it, limned by an out-throw of yellow lamplight. Wohaw needed more men, so he drew the gun he had taken from Ringo Savage and sent two shots crashing through the front windows of the saloon. He shot out the plate glass that was the pride of Tailholt's bank. For good measure, he reloaded and triggered half a dozen shots through the door of the jail.

All hell was about to break loose around him, and Wohaw's every instinct told him to light a shuck out of there. But he hung back, watching the lights go out in the saloon and men spill into the street. Someone came pounding toward him along the boardwalk, sending a hard yell ahead.

"They're after the bank!"

"There's the lookout in the street!" a second man shouted, and a gun exploded and a bullet left its lethargic whine in Wohaw's ear.

"Hell to breakfast! *That's my Tumbleweed horse!*"

Wohaw recognized John Shanks' wrathful bellow. He saw the town marshal come stumbling out of the jail in his long-handles, trying to drag on his pants as he ran. And he thought for a panicky instant that he had waited too long, for men were in the saddle now and lead hunted after him as he spurred out of town.

But he was out of six-shooter range as he tore past the last house and headed for the New Mexico line. His heart flounced like a fish and skidded abruptly into his boots when he glanced back and saw what looked like half the town strung out behind him. He would have plenty of men to fight Ringo Savage—if *he could just stay ahead of them!*

It was something to worry about, for Tumbleweed had been going strong since morning. The posse was gaining as they crossed the state line. This time Wohaw knew they wouldn't turn back, for it looked like the chase would be over in another mile. But just when he thought the big bay was going to stumble and fall under him, Tumbleweed caught his second wind and lunged ahead as if sensing his rider's sheer desperation.

With an occasional bullet kicking up dust behind him, Wohaw led the posse across the draw where he'd killed the Rambling-S yearling, and in the gray light of dawn he rode full-tilt ahead of them into the Rambling-S ranch yard.

"Look out, boys," he yelled hoarsely. "*It's the law!*"

The Tailholt posse had never expected to find itself in the middle of an all-out gun battle, but now it was too late to turn back. Six-shooters exploded like Gatling guns in the ranch yard. Most of Ringo Savage's toughs, recruited along the border, could not risk a run-in with the law. They fell back to their horses and beat a hasty retreat, shooting as they went. But not before a mess of them had been mangled by the Tailholt posse.

Wohaw saw two of the outlaws shot out of the saddle. He saw Ringo Savage and a slight, frozen-eyed man he knew must be Lulu Bell, rear up out in the brush. Lulu Bell shot once as he whirled toward his horse, and something like a sledge hammer struck Wohaw high in the side, smashing at his ribs and ripping flesh. He managed to cling to the saddle-

horn and trigger a shot back at Lulu Bell that tripped the little renegade as if his legs had been roped from under him.

But Wohaw's gun arm was going limp. He couldn't muster enough strength to lift the smoking weapons again, and Ringo Savage was coming straight toward him.

Savage looked wild-eyed in the gray dawn. With his gun crew coyoting away through the brush, and all his big schemes blasted, he seemed to go beserk. His huge face was twisted with insane fury as he opened up on Wohaw.

Wohaw was looking death in the face, and knew it. He heard lead whisper by his head and braced himself against the killing shock of a second shot. The shot came, but Wohaw was still in the saddle. He was rooted there by sheer surprise as Savage dropped his gun, breaking at the neck and knees and waist to crumble slowly to the ground.

The Tailholt marshal looked up from the man he had killed to Wohaw, and blew smoke from the barrel of his six-gun.

"Now what the hell was eating that jasper?" he demanded, in angry bewilderment. "What's this all about, anyway? You—"

Wohaw managed a weak grin before he slid from the saddle. The ground came up to hit him in the face, but it seemed to him that he kept right on falling into a deeper darkness than he had ever known. . . .

THINGS came back gradually. He was in a bed, and the sheets felt cool and clean to his tired body. His whole right side was stiff and numb. He could hear voices nearby; so he kept his eyes closed to listen.

Sam Blair and Cheryl were both talking excitedly, telling the marshal what had happened. And Wohaw knew from John Shanks' voice that the salty old lawman was suspicious about the whole thing.

"And when he come riding in on that Tumbleweed horse," Sam was saying, "we knowed he was the man you sent. But he didn't let on. He meant to play a lone hand. So he kept us thinking he was riding on out of the country—"

"Which was exactly what he intended to do," interrupted John Shanks, hotly. "I didn't lend him that bay horse. The danged fool—"

Wohaw sat up hurriedly, wincing as pain stabbed his wounded side. "We'll

VALLEY OF SUDDEN SLEEP

Remembering the bullet-ripped corpses of his kinfolks, the man called Ashburn vowed he'd ride to hell and back to regain that stolen rangeland—if need be, over the dead bodies of the powerful Garriott clan, who'd moved in, fed him, and raised him—and now waited with hidden guns to blast him to Kingdom-Come!

in Roe Richmond's Tense Frontier Fend Novel
BURN 'EM OUT AND BURY 'EM!

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RANGE-BARONS' FREEZE-OUT!



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talk about that hoss trade on the way back to Tailholt, Marshal," he said, reaching for his boots. "He ain't got quite the bottom I figured, so I'm willing to sell him back to you for less'n I give."

Sweat poured down his face as he tried to pull a boot on with his one good hand. He wanted out of there before John Shanks let the cat out of the bag. He reckoned he'd rather face a hanging than the hurt look in Cheryl's eyes when she found out he was a horse thief.

"Horse trade?" The Tailholt marshal strangled on the words. "Why you thiev-in'—"

"You can't call a man a thief just for skinnin' you on a horse trade," Sam Blair chuckled.

"Shut up, both of you!" Cheryl Blair's eyes blazed wrath at the marshal as she pushed Wohaw back on the bed. "I won't stand by and see you badger a sick man about a horse trade, John Shanks. And after what he's done for us, I think you should be ashamed of yourself! He offered to sell the horse back to you, didn't he?"

The marshal looked startled. "You mean you *like* this lowdown—" He didn't have to finish the sentence, for Cheryl blushed furiously. Wohaw was appalled. Now he knew he had to get out of there before one of the posse came in dragging a hang-rope.

"But I've got to go back to Tailholt with the marshal," he protested, trying to rise. "He wants me for—to— That horse—"

Cheryl pushed him back on the bed, and he looked helplessly at John Shanks.

The marshal took off his coat, smoothed out the crown, carefully dented it again

with his fist, then clapped the hat back on his head. His mental processes were so slow and labored that Wohaw could almost read his thoughts.

"You did a lot of good here, son," he said finally. "Fresco Archuleta rode in to tell about you slickin' Savage out of them cattle. And you pulled Sam out of a hole, badgerin' us into tailin' you across the state line and finishing up his fight. You run a big risk by not sashaying on out of the country when you could, and that's in your favor."

"Dammit, the risk meant nothing to him!" Sam Blair protested, with the kind of pride an old cowman usually reserves for a good saddle or a new son-in-law. "He warn't afraid of Savage and his gun-slicks!"

But the marshal hadn't meant that, and Wohaw knew it.

"I still haven't figured that horse trade out," went on Shanks, taking his hat off again and erasing the dent. "But until I do, I reckon I'll just let you keep the horse. Seems to me you've earned it. And I'd half promised to give him to Cheryl as a weddin' present, anyway. So that's settled."

He gave Wohaw a meaning glance. "But let me hear of you kickin' over the traces just one more time," he warned flatly, "and I'll have your freckled hide decorating my jail fence!"

Wohaw's grin started away down inside and spread all over his face. He looked at Cheryl. Dog take it, that old star-packin' marshal didn't have a worry in the world about him going straight. The kind of stars in Cheryl's eyes would keep any man from swinging a hungry loop or packing an itchy running-iron!

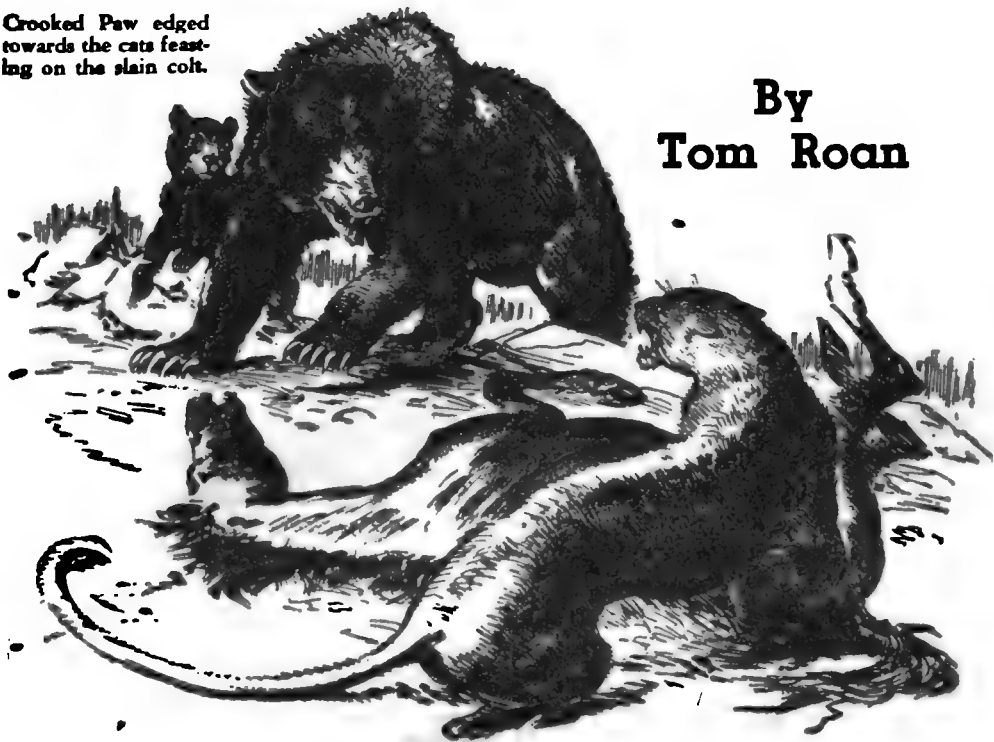
THE END



MONTANA FIGHTING DEVIL

Crooked Paw edged
towards the cats feast-
ing on the slain colt.

By
Tom Roan



● The bullet that came screeching through the morning air of that high Montana country told that old grizzly queen, Crooked Paw, that the time of the hated man-creature was again near. ●
● And as a second slug tore into her left shoulder, she turned to flee — but found to escape she would have to put to rest a legend as old as time: ●
Crooked Paw would have to lick her weight in mountain lions!

UNTIL the bullet came the great mountainside was peaceful enough for a couple of grizzlies. Up here just above the timberline on Old Baldy the only noise had been that of grating stones being overturned here and there where the fat gophers had made their dens under the rocks. Old Crooked Paw had been turning the half-ton slabs as easily

as a man would have opened a gate. The big, half-grown cub had been greedily spitting right and left, making kill after kill and immediately gobbling it down.

Breakfast had begun with the usual spurts of excitement on the part of Stinky, the cub, when his belly was empty. His nine-foot, thousand-pound mother never made mistakes. Her battle-scarred old

nose told her everything. It was really an excellent nose, far better than her rather weak eyes, a fault with all grizzlies. With it she could pick a scent out of the wind from a mile away. Each time she poked it into the mouth of a hole under the edge of a slab she immediately knew whether gophers were there or not.

Crooked Paw had not turned a single slab without a sudden scampering and squeaking of juicy little brown imps trying to scatter in all directions as they fled for their lives. Many had managed a getaway, but more of them were getting away now. Stinky's belly was half-full, his hunger beginning to wane for gophers, his strokes not so rapid and sure. In his pig-gish brain, always wanting something just out of reach, had trickled the picture of berries down along the river and—better yet—wild honey from holes in the great wall of mile-high cliffs standing on the east bank of the curving and whipping stream.

The bullet spoiled everything. In it was a threat of sudden destruction, pain and life-long crippling. It was a wail, to Crooked Paw, a terrorizing shriek in the air that ended in a splintering, half-musical crash on the rocks, followed by a long line of glancing pops lifting little mushrooming puffs of dust as it sped on up the mountainside.

It meant nothing to the cub, but bullets or even the far-away report of a rifle meant a great many things to Crooked Paw. She had heard them before. In the past she had felt them, not less than six or seven times. Many of her scars and the crippled left foreleg gave ample evidence of that. And now she wheeled, remembering men, guns and even dogs that had left dark and sometimes dreadful pictures hard-drawn in her brain beneath that long, sloping skull, itself thick enough to sometimes turn a rifle's bullet and send it whistling away in the air. She came to her feet with a snort and a surge, the full nine

feet of her. Her forepaws came up, fanning the air about her with furious strokes, little pig-eyes turned to tiny volcanos burning with sudden rage to the bottom of their dark depths.

A bullet meant get out of there—fast. She whipped the wind to locate the true direction of her would-be killers. It would tell her the way to run. And as she fanned two more bullets came, the shots crashing just inside the timberline down toward the high cliffs above the river. She flicked both ears, hearing the pop and slap behind her as the deadly things passed her, making more dust puffs on the steeply rising slope that would end in the white crown of snow always to be seen on Old Baldy's high head.

SHE wheeled back to Stinky, dropping to all fours. Stinky was not yet interested, no thought of danger, no smattering of fear yet entering his brain. At the moment he was doing a little sniffing and nose-poking on his own part in the mouth of a long-deserted hole under another big slab.

Crooked Paw had no time to stand and wait for an argument. She let loose, smacking the cub an up-scooping blow under the rump. It lifted him, and sent him half-sprawling forward on his nose, a sudden, fierce growl coming from the big mother that as good as said, "Travel, you!" He let go with the usual wail, but he moved, one end feeling afire, the other end due to catch it if he stopped to tell her what he thought about the bullying and nagging of mothers in general.

There was a small, rock-rimmed break in the slope just ahead. More bullets came as she headed the cub toward it. Stinky was fleeing yet only because of fear of her sudden fury, unable to stand it but knowing that it meant *move*. A bullet grazed him across the rump. Another made Crooked Paw shake her head as it passed close to the left ear. The rake to the cub

gave him the idea that his mother had popped him again. He kept bounding, like a jumping hog, and tumbled headfirst into the break. In a second Crooked Paw coming down atop of him. She gave him a lifting push, forcing him to swing to the left, the old bear growling her worst as she hastily followed him.

Coming in a group, six men on horseback had already appeared down there from the edge of the timber. Two of them had been dismounted to open fire. They had swung back into their saddles, galloping forward now, bent on shortening the distance before again opening up with their rifles.

Crooked Paw was a little too smart for that. She had the advantage, and was going to keep it as long as she could. The ditch-like crack in the rocks was getting deeper, abruptly turning and twisting downward. In addition the roughness of the slope made it impossible for the horses to come far. Four of the men were finally leaving them with the remaining two, and were hurrying forward afoot, every rifleman breathless. Older, more seasoned grizzly hunters would have told them they were already dangerously close, especially to an old bear with a cub. At any moment she might turn and charge, and once a grizzly charged all hell would never stop her until her heart was shot to ribbons.

BUT the urge to charge had not yet come to Crooked Paw. She was unhurt. The bullet had merely burned the cub, cutting a short groove through the thick hair. In his panic of fear he was still hog-jumping it along, trying to keep out of reach but most certainly due to tell her what he thought of this business before he was done!

Fighting back when fall hunters came was a very bad business. Old Crooked Paw knew all about it, and the cub knew nothing. For the past couple of years

Crooked Paw had avoided all of it by taking herself away to the highest crags and peaks of the Rockies, hugging to them until the heavy snows started falling to drive all hunters out of the regions.

Right now, knowing the danger of the high, bald places, Crooked Paw was heading for the timber. Once she had gained it she herded the cub for the nearest underbrush thicket, snarling now and then, making him go in and under, and telling him to move quietly, that he did not have sense enough to know a very terrible danger was right atop of him.

They stopped several times, so well hidden in the brush hunters might have passed within a couple of rods of them without knowing they were so near to danger. At each stop Crooked Paw listened, sniffing the air gently to make no noise about it.

By the time they were on a bench of low cliffs above the river the cub seemed to have some understanding in that pesky brain under his thick skull. He moved when Crooked Paw low-growled or poked him with her nose. Going down a ledge, they came to the edge of a wide pool. The cub halted. His mother promptly pushed him into the water, and slid in behind him, following him across to immediately head him into the next wall of underbrush.

Left alone to manage this on her own, it would have been over as far as Crooked Paw was concerned. She always avoided a fight as the best way out. Alone, she would have kept to the brush and the ravines here on the timbered slopes, putting the river and her old den in the high cliffs a mile downstream far behind her.

But there was Stinky, and Stinky always meant trouble. Each time she tried to herd the cub up a ravine he bolted on across it continually, heading down the river, rich wild berries and wild honey in his stupid, ever-wanting brain again.

They passed within a short half-mile of the place where the river whipped itself

into a white streak against the foot of the high cliffs. The cub tried to turn here several times. His mother caught him once, intending to give him an all-out mauling to knock some sense into his foolish head. His frantic wailing stopped her.

This would never do! Even if they were far way from the hunters who had opened fire on them, others might be around, ready to start shooting, their infernal bone-splintering rifles hailing the bullets. Old Crooked Paw had to do the next best thing. She had to stop everything, hugging him and licking away his tears until he was quiet again before going on again.

But as usual Stinky still had a mind of his own. He was a very spoiled, utterly cantankerous bear-brat when he wanted to be. His rump, ribs and ears had been whacked, slapped and mauled, and at last she had held him in her arms, the right one always tighter than the left because of the left's crookedness and twisted claws. It was a good sign that she was sorry, licking his tears away to prove it; it was his chance to make her pay for it, to make her cater more to his whims.

He was no longer afraid of her low growling when they had passed the great wall of cliffs across the river from them and were a mile and a half downstream, still following the west side. Stinky still had the lead. He was going to keep it. But something stopped him, sitting him back on his rump, making his nose come up.

It was a nice smell, a sweet and sticky smell coming up the river. Stinky's mouth immediately watered. He was not even listening to the old bear's low growls now. The smell had rooted him to the spot. No other smell had the slightest effect on him. This was something! If the old bear's low growls kept saying there was danger here, then what of it! He had no desire to see or sense it. If he got into trouble there was his mother to get him out of it. Only

a couple of weeks ago he had dragged her into a fight with old Mamook, another huge grizzly. Because of her crippled paw and forearm Crooked Paw had received the worst of it, getting both ears batted down and her face knocked lopsided before she had to turn tail and flee.

But it had not worried Stinky, had been no skin off of his nose. He never worried about little things. Life as a cub saw it, after all, was only one merry hell after another. Getting her batted around paid Crooked Paw back for a lot of things. She blamed him for everything, even, it seemed, for the terrific downpour of rains that sometimes poured over the Rockies. Only a few months ago she had as good as fanned fire from his rump when the spring flood came along to roar from the high places in thundering torrents sweeping everything before them. It had not been his fault, but the fanning had taken place when he decided to give her the run-by and cross the swollen river.

He still held the advantage here. The mere fact that man-smell came along with the sweetness did not bother him. Stinky had never had an opportunity to come close to one of the brutes. If anything started happening—well, there was that thousand-pound mother to take over in grizzly fashion. Most things usually got out of the way when they saw her coming. She was never afraid of anything, and he could not understand her timidity here—sitting back there growling and scratching her rump, and such a sweet, sweet smell in the air!

Quickly now, Stinky moved on, watching her back over his shoulder and ready to make a sudden swerve to the right or left in case she decided to take a run at him. At his quicker pace he was in the hunting camp before he realized it. He had slipped under a cloud of brush overhanging two big lumps of rock, and here he was, right in the rim of it, almost face to face with a very big, very black

man in a cook's white cap and apron who had just taken something from the oven of a large camp stove. At once the odor appeared to set the world afire all around, making Stinky rear to his hind feet again.

The man must have seen the bear at the same time. He dropped his big pan on top of the stove and stepped back, his mouth flying open, his eyes popping. For the next three seconds man and bear stood there, the cub's nose twisting from side to side, the man's mouth flapping but not a single sound coming from it.

Stinky took a step forward. The man took a step backward. He froze into absolute rigidity when Stinky heard the brush crackle and a low, rumbling growl, and knew that his mother was rising to her hind feet behind him. The man spoke then, voice painful.

"Naw—it ain't!"

SO IT was as easy as this! Stinky moved forward, knowing that big mother was right behind him. The pan was there on the stove for the taking. He tottered to it on his hind feet, and poked his nose into it. The heat set his nose on fire, and he staggered back with a wail, then smacked the pan from the stove with a lightning blow, sending it sailing into a big sheet-iron tub of cold water a dozen feet away.

The cook let out just one more sound, a wail that was like the howl of a coyote in a dead-still winter night, and the cook was gone, heading down the river, most remarkably fast for such a big, fat man. Stinky moved on to see what had happened to the pudding. Crooked Paw spotted a smaller iron tub just beyond the rock where a big slab of bacon was lying. In the tub, nicely cleaned and covered with cold water, lay about twenty pounds of rainbow trout.

It was a mess when they left the camp, the cook watching them for an hour from the top of a tall tree six hundred yards

down the river. The portable phonograph was broken, records scattered and smashed. Two fine tents were down, clawed to ribbons when Crooked Paw got inside them and the flaps fell, showing no way out except through the sides. The camp stove had been knocked over. Wreckages of boxes, bags and cartons were everywhere. A couple of cases of the best brandy and Scotch had their lids clawed off but the bottles remaining unbroken. No man deliberately intending to wreck the camp could have done a better job of it.

Stinky had put up an argument when it struck Crooked Paw that it was time to go. His belly was full of pudding, a stack of layer cake and pies, fish and more bacon torn from a crate. Never had he had such a variety to eat! His belly, like his big mother's, seemed to be dragging the ground, and yet she had to box him right and left to get him started back up the valley, the tell-tale remains of his share of a full-case of eggs smeared over his nose and face.

When they came to a sharp bend in the river Stinky plowed into the icy water. The wet cold immediately cooled his yet-burning nose that had come into direct, sticky contact with the hot pudding. Crooked Paw waited, bear-quarreling out of the side of her mouth at him. When he took the notion to go on across the river she had to flounce down there and spat him a few pops to get him out of the water.

This was not right again. The cub set up another wail. His belly was full, and it was time to return to the old den for a long nap. But Crooked Paw knew best. She had heard far-away gunfire again up there somewhere around the high slopes of Old Baldy. The thing to do was to get out of here, as far way from Old Baldy as possible. Now she drove the cantankerous cub up a ravine, herding him higher and higher on the slopes, not going to take any foolishness about this business!

It was late in the afternoon, high in the shaggy crags and snowcapped peaks of the Lost Souls, a dozen miles west of Old Baldy, that Crooked Paw heard the dogs behind her. There had been no sign of the brutes at the camp they had left in wreckage behind them, and she had no way of knowing that the half-mad hunters had returned at noon and had sent five miles down the valley to another camp for the dogs. Dogs were just dogs, mean and tricky, often hard to shake. They caught up with a bear in the most devilish places, smart enough to not come in too closely and get the living daylights batted out of them. All they would do would be to sit back and bark, slipping in for a quick nip each time a bear turned to go on, driving her wild and making her have to stand her ground until the hunters could come up.

Stinky heard them, and turned to sniff the wind with his mother, a bear-grin on his face. This was something new. He had never heard dogs barking, had never seen one. Without Crooked Paw to smack him on he might have settled back on his rump to wait for them and see what they looked like when they came up. Crooked Paw already knew and wanted no part of them. In bear-fashion she tried to tell the cub, the darndest, most pig-headed, know-it-all young yap any bear had ever tried to rear and teach the dangers of life that were always befalling a grizzly. No other bear was more of a prize to a hunter's sharp eyes, no bear harder to kill or meaner to fight once they started to fight.

This thing now required all the wisdom of the Wild, a close-hugging to the instinctive law of self-preservation if they expected to come out of it alive. No grizzly was a good climber, the worst of all the bears when one came right down to it. Their eyes were never good, the keen nose having to take their place for the most part, ears playing a close second. Knowing the danger, she herded the cub

to the right. Here he faced a wall of jagged rock, and immediately balked.

There was no sense to turning aside here that the cub could see. They had climbed steadily for more than two miles, finally reaching a narrow pass high among the broken white peaks. On the other side of the pass the traveling would be downward. Now this wall!

CROOKED PAW had to give him another whipping, an hourly thing when trouble was at hand. She forced him up, climbing slowly and timidly, his tearful whimpering having no effect on her as she followed right behind him, watching his every move and ready to grab if he slipped on the ice that covered the rocks before they were at the top.

Now it was snow, cold under the paws and cold on the nose—no place for a grizzly! The cub tried to set up another argument. Another spat, one that might have broken a man's neck, changed his mind when he lifted his paws to fight, going to stand his ground. Grumbling at every yard of the way, he was herded on around the west side of the white peak, and soon it was down and down again, Crooked Paw having laid a trail no dog could follow straight on through.

They were in the deep crack on the north side of the peak now, going down and down, heavy timber a mile below. Deep in the timber, two long miles down on the floor of a long, narrow valley, glimmered a blue lake, itself close to three miles long, and half as broad—and a big lake was a good thing when any animal of the Wild was trying to hide itself from men and dogs.

DR. INMAN SHONTO spotted her and the cub through his powerful glasses late the next afternoon. They were high on the face of a thousand-foot wall of many-colored ledges, ragged shelves and holes at the north end of the lake and

seemed to be slowly making their way down for water. The doctor held his breath for almost a minute, sitting there on his worn-out bay horse, a light, rude camp behind him at the other end of the lake.

Slim Jim Smith, the long-necked, hook-nosed cowboy guide had been right when he warned him about using the borrowed dogs.

"Only for general direction's sake, a dog ain't much good after a smart bear, once it hits the Lost Souls, Doc. An' this one's the smartest of the smart. It's Old Crooked Paw, like I said. Tracks in the smooth sand back at camp swore to that. She's been through lots of shootin's, an' in an' out of all kinds of traps. More men, I'd say, have hunted her than any other bear in these parts. Three years ago the sheepmen down in Sun River Valley pooled up a five hundred dollar reward for her hide an' left foreleg. I reckon it's still standin'."

It had only spurred the doctor on. It was his third trip to the Rockies in hopes of taking home two or three grizzly hides and their snarling heads. His house on Riverside Drive was one of the hunter's show places in New York. He had hunted in Africa and India. The head of a great bull-elephant hung above his enormous rough-rock fireplace. At either side of it, looking rather calm, hung the head of a rhino'. The rest of the walls were covered with rifles and heads, snarling lions, tigers and leopards. Along with those were all manner of other heads of the hard-to-get from the far places, some of them deadly, others utterly harmless but beautiful heads just the same to a hunter's eye.

Now if Dr. Inman Shonto went back to New York empty-handed for the third time in a row after elaborately planned trips to the Rockies he was bound to be the victim of many jokes in the World Wide Sportsmen's Club. And if the tale

of the wrecked camp leaked out, certain members of the club who had shot grizzly would laugh his ears down.

A short, dark-skinned, bench-legged man, he eased his horse forward, hugging the edge of the timber. The grizzlies were about fifteen hundred yards away, much too far for a man to open fire. Three hundred at the most would have been more to his liking. Smith had warned him that that was too close for comfort when tangling with a grizzly.

"Six hundred's more to my likin'," drawled the cowboy, "when you stack your chips agin a grizzly. They ain't like no other kind of bear. They fight back when you make 'em fight. At six hundred with a ball heavy enough you can knock 'em down as they charge, givin' yourself time to pump in another shell an' aim. Other bear'll just roll over most generally when hard hit. Not a grizzly! Get one in a trap an' she'll beat the bark off the timber with it for rods around her. I saw a black bear once caught just by the toe. Damned if it wasn't settin' there cryin' real tears as it begged the fella to take it off! A grizzly would have wrapped that trap around his head an' gutted 'im on the spot. They're hell, Doc!"

But warnings were useless. The fever of the kill had swept over the doctor. He forced the horse through walls of underbrush, spurring him, slapping him with a light quirt. On the saddle hung a powerful London Express, one of the choice weapons of African hunters, its bullet heavy and powerful enough to down the largest bull-elephant. All he would need would be one shot to a vital spot, and down would come his grizzly at last! Then, of course, he would get the cub for good measure. His hide would at least be large enough for a rug in the study. No man he knew in the Sportsmen's could boast of two grizzly kills in a single afternoon of shooting.

He pulled up at five hundred yards,

stopping his bay behind an old windfall. In a second he was on the ground, the rifle ready. Moving cautiously ahead for a few yards, he settled himself behind a cluster of three big stones near the edge of the water. For some unaccountable reason his heart was pumping so rapidly little pains had come into his temples. His hands shook. This was the thrill, not fear! And yet, being a doctor, he knew that both were so closely related no man could tell them apart. He laughed inwardly at himself, flattening comfortably on the ground to wait, an opening between the rocks letting him keep the bears in sight, the powerful rifle eased forward.

It took time, more than he expected, before he was as calm as if studying a patient's chart. The old bear and the cub were at the water's edge, just finishing their evening drink. He lifted the rifle, fitted the butt carefully to his shoulder, looping his left arm in the sling, knowing that he had the advantage of the wind. His eye came down to the sights. At the last moment, finger already tightening on the trigger, he switched the weapon from the old bear to the cub, knowing that she would not immediately turn to flee even if he dropped it dead in its tracks. Grizzlies were worse than lions when it came to protecting their cubs and—according to all supposed to know them and their habits—would stand and fight over them until they died.

Now the finger was tightening again, rifle as steady as a rock. In two or three seconds the crash gushed from the weapon's muzzle, an all-splintering sound that was like a sudden fall and shattering of tremendous panes of glass, the noise appearing to reach from one end of the lake to the other, at the same time swinging out through and above the walls of timber to lose itself high in the air.

Inman Shonto could have yelled when he saw the cub go down, the old bear whirling to it, trying to paw it to its feet.

He whipped another long, heavy cartridge into the firing chamber. Again that dark, intensely bright yet intensely cold right eye was fitting the sights on his intended kill, this time the old bear, herself. The forefinger curved ever so gently. The rifle jerked, making his collar bone suddenly ache, another sound of shattering and crashing glass rushing up and down the lake and spreading through the timber.

Coming to his knees now, Inman Shonto could not help it when a little yelp of delight came from him. He had knocked the old bear off her feet! The cub was still down! The cub was still down! A couple of more shots would make it a sure thing!

He whipped in another cartridge, going to rest his shoulder against the rock to his left and fire from one knee on the other, the other as a prop for his elbow. He fired again, and swore when he saw the dust fly just above and behind the old bear, telling him his third bullet had passed over her with an inch or two to spare. Jerking out the empty shell, his excitement overwhelming him now, he swore in a small, desperate wail when the bolt jammed on its way in without chambering the cartridge.

Damn it, he had paid forty dollars to have this rifle looked over by an expert before leaving New York! The fool had done something to it that was not right! Only yesterday he had thought that the extractor was not exactly as it should have been. Now instead of slamming the cartridge home it had stood it on its butt in the loading slide, the bolt jamming against it.

He grabbed the cartridge, trying to jerk it free, finding it as tightly wedged as a man could have wedged it with a hammer. Another oath came from him, then he glanced back at the head of the lake, his eyes widening. The cub was up, running along at the edge of the water, his wailing that of a terrorized child.

The old bear was next, coming up as if in a daze, her crooked left paw dangling as if broken. As if his wailing would have brought her back to life from the dead, she stumblingly set out after the cub, and before Inman Shonto could get that cartridge free the cub had swerved into an opening in the rocks. The old bear followed, and they were gone.

INMAN SHONTO went crazy on the spot. He slammed the rifle down between the rocks. He jumped on it, banging it with his heels, making an unholy show of himself as he cursed and stormed, heaping oath upon oath on the men who had manufactured such a weapon in the first place, and damning the New York gunsmith to the lowest and hottest pits of Hell, completely forgetting that the gun had never failed him before, not when faced with charging lion, tiger and elephant. No one could talk him out of his rage, even when he returned to camp.

"I had them both!" he cried. "Both down, the old one and the cub! Your damned Crooked Paw, Smith, your damned Crooked Paw! The bear no other man has ever been able to down! And what happened? I'll tell you! The rifle jammed. Look at it! The cartridge standing like a broken thumb in a splint! *Jammed!*"

"They all jam at some time," drawled Smith. "The best of the best, Doc. A man ought to never let another man clean his gun. Don't pay in the long run. He ain't stackin' his life on it, an' the man who owns it is. I wouldn't blame the gun."

There was wild-duck and rainbow trout for supper. Smith had shot the ducks at dawn, catching the fish around noon. Inman Shonton wanted no part of any of it. He took brandy instead, six or seven double-headers, but even the brandy lacked something, making him sick at his stomach in place of settling his nerves. Nothing would satisfy him but that old bear

and her cub. He had to have them now. No one at the Sportsmen's would believe his story. Damn it, no one believed a man the third time he came back with only an excuse for his failures! Not at the Sportsmen's! They would only laugh at him.

But, as one of the heart-breaking things in the life of the born hunter and killer of the far places, Inman Shonto never saw them again. He hunted them zealously for the next week, sometimes desperately, especially when his time was growing short. He shifted camp, knowing that the old bear had struck out for the lower country. Smith, out hunting smaller game again with a shotgun, had spotted her the third morning on the bank of a stream, dutifully licking a wound in the cub's thick scalp and giving some attention to another in her left shoulder. A shotgun had been no weapon at all when it came to tangling with a grizzly, and Smith had kept his distance.

"Kinda sentimental on some things, anyhow," had admitted the cowboy. "It was just a little too damn much like a hurt mother, a regular woman, now, tryin' to take care of her sick child. Maybe I woulda backed off if I'd had a good rifle in my hands. Made me feel queer."

Slim Jim Smith saw her the final time, just at the crack of dawn the last day of the hunting trip. He was out again looking for small game on a lake a mile ahead of him and right down in the edge of the horse ranching country. Following the south rim of a narrow, deep and rock-walled draw in the side of a ridge, he was stopped in his tracks by the sound of a short, quick scurrying of hoof, a bawl of terror, and something coming down on the shale-floored ground ahead, just around a sharp little bend. A few minutes later he was dropping to his stomach, rage pounding through him as he cursed himself under his breath for not having brought along a rifle or at least a few shells loaded with buckshot.

Neck and back broken, blood pouring from it in a dozen streams, a steel-dust colt about a year old lay dying on the shale seventy-five or eighty feet below him. Had he been only a few minutes sooner he would have seen the kill. The colt had wandered into the draw. At the head of it, it had started to turn back, and there the lightning had come down from the west side of the draw in the shape of two full-grown cougars dropping silently from a shelf along the top of a smooth wall of rock fifteen feet above it. One had landed on the colt's rump. The other had been more accurate in the way lions usually killed. It was a female, landing on the withers, left hind claw getting a grip on the colt's spine, a forepaw wrapping over its neck, the other around the nose. In a furious twist the back and neck had been broken almost at the same instant, the heavy cats riding their victim on to the ground, the she-devil cutting his throat.

Slim Smith slid the shotgun forward, intending to start shooting with no hopes of anything but scaring the hated cats off. He started to cock the gun, but let the hammer gently back as the click of claws sounded below him. In a matter of seconds he was looking down on a crippled old grizzly and her cub coming out of a hole in the rocks just below him. The old bear stopped with a growl. The cub shoved right on, the smell of blood and hot meat in his nose.

Now Slim Smith was going to see something long and long debated in this country by the best of men. Grizzlies against mountain lions! The lions had surged back, snarling, unable to wheel and run because of the distance to the shelf along the top of the smooth wall. At the moment neither lion seemed in the notion of retreating far from the kill.

The cub forced the issue. Here was meat, and he was hungry! He moved straight on, snarling his cub snarls. The old bear seemed to be trying to growl him

back, and then was suddenly giving up. She moved right on in after the cub, rearing to her hind feet with a snarl when the she-lion darted a yard forward, making a fierce right-paw rake for the cub that sat him back on his rump with a startled wail.

This was going to be something! Steadily, looking as if she was growling out of one side of her scarred mouth and laughing out of the other, the old bear was moving into it, right paw up, fanning. The deep, dark mark and swollen flesh of Dr. Shonto's bullet in her shoulder made it look as if she would get little use from her left paw.

The cat's might have retreated at the last moment, cowards unable to bluff their way out. A small dog could often run one of these full-grown colt-killers up a tree and make it stay there for hours. The big male turned and looked at the ledge, and wheeled back snarling his worst. It must have encouraged the she-cat. She shot forward, straight for the old bear's throat. The terrible right paw struck then, turning the cat in mid-air and sending her spinning back to the male.

Now it was a double charge, the she-cat at first slinging her head, the blood splattering from her left ear, hanging by only shreds from that one lightning blow. Both cats shot across the dead colt, both aiming for the older bear. The she-cat was faster, just a trifle ahead of the male as an African lioness would have led it. Old Crooked Paw got in another stroke, and went down, knocked from her feet by the sheer weight of the lunging male.

The male might have made a quick get-away if he had tried for it. But the old bear was down, sprawled on her back on the rough ground, the cub only whimpering and trying to back out of it, now that he had the fight started. The she-cat was up, bouncing rubber on her feet. As she shot again for the bear the big male wheeled in, helping her try for the

death stroke in both their panics of fear.

With two lions on her, Old Crooked Paw came up, cut here and there, beginning to show blood. She was all grizzly now, and a grizzly fought it out, giving no quarter, asking for none in a thing like this. She flung both cats back over the colt, the left paw painfully beginning to get into action as if a joint somewhere had been wrenched back in place.

Having been almost successful in the first try, the lions made another double-charge of it.

Old Crooked Paw was cool about it this time. Her whipping right forepaw wrapped itself around the she-cat's neck, giving her a jerk and a terrible sling to one side just as the male struck. In spite of herself, the old bear went down again.

For the moment it looked as if the old bear was going to get the worst of it after all. Smith once nervously raised his gun, intending to fire in the air. Then he saw the cub. Grizzly fighting instinct was finally showing itself!

With his mother down, Stinky wheeled himself into it, not the great fighter on his hind feet but having the best of young grizzly teeth. He seized the big male by

the left hind leg, sinking his teeth all the way to the bone and surging backward.

Old Crooked Paw got in one more stroke to the male's head as she came rearing up. It was direct this time, popping like a hard ball on the side of a house, the male lifting from the ground, flopping backward through the air, the cub wheeling in for another bite. Neck broken, half of one side of it torn out from the claws, it was the end of the male. Now Crooked Claw turned to the dazed she-cat, crawled up to its forefeet. With another one of those all-ending strokes she hit the cat, and Slim Smith afterwards swore that the cat's head was torn half-off its shoulders.

It was over now. Crooked Paw turned to the cub, licking his few scratches, ignoring her own cuts. A few minutes later, dead cats to the right and left, she was attacking the rich hot meat, the cub pushing in beside her to look for choice parts.

Slim Jim Smith moved now, worming himself back from the rim, a man with a tale to tell to his grandchildren. Not a word about bears would fall from his lips when he returned to camp and the sulking doctor, not hunting at all today, merely waiting for morning to leave the hills.



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Smashing Novel
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Seneca roared at his hired gunman: "Take him, Rock!"

CHAPTER ONE

Bad Trouble on the Red

THE BROKEN land sloped south from the Red River, pock-marked by patches of thickets and slashed in place by shallow gulleys like the old boot tracks of a staggering giant. When Tray Carlson first laid wind-red-denied eyes on it, he viewed desolation that

matched the nagging uneasiness in his heart. Every nickel he had in the world crawled before him under the hides of his 500 head of trail beef. And it was land like this that he and Blaine would have to hurdle on their gambling chance to make Abilene while prices held good.

This was the soul-killing North Texas country that awaited trail riders at the jumpoff of the dust-eating plod to mar-

ket. Across it, Texas beef first had to funnel to a river crossing for the eternity of the march toward the north star and buyers in the new Kansas towns. Crouched in a jagged semi-circle above those roughs was the river—vicious, always, whether bank-full with flood waters, or sluggish with crimson quicksand.

Beyond the Red lay Nowhere. Mile spliced to endless mile of sullen land, with red and white men to match. Oklahoma Territory, its name was; but men who had ridden it once were quick to add all the profanely descriptive words in their vocabularies.

Blaine's Cross L trail crew, short-handed, short-tempered, and hungry, was three miles south of the flooded river on that warm September afternoon. A mile away from the herd a rider tore hell-for-leather into a stand of stunted cedar growth in pursuit of a long-legged trio of escaping steers.

But with all his grim, hard-bouncing chase after the stragglers and the uneasiness that rode with him, Tray Carlson that day was feeling cautious symptoms of being a happy man. Twenty-dollar prices, maybe more, waited in Kansas, if reports were true. Herds had successfully made it in '67 and '68—why couldn't he and Blaine do as well? That kind of beef money would patch up a lot of scars a Yankee prison camp had left on him; patch up, too, the hopes, sweat and guts he had squandered in trying to build something out of those Pecos grass acres.

Fifteen minutes later, Tray rode out of the brush on the river side of the flat bench. He was not hazing the strays ahead of him. His dirt-colored mustang was slowed to a nervous, side-drifting walk, and Tray's creased face was thoughtful, his eyes thin with concentration.

He could see the dust of the main herd across the stretch of brushy broken land to the east. Over there was his own

little bunch of cattle, thrown in with Blaine's 1,000 head. Their crew, undermanned by half for the job ahead, and short on grub since the Brazos crossing accident, was holding for a drift to better grass beyond the double bend, before tackling the crossing into the Territory.

He twisted to look back at the thicket. His job that afternoon had been to haze in stragglers. But now it hit him, with cold fingers punching the blunt knowledge home around his chest muscles, that a bigger job was forming. What he had seen back there in the cedars was his final draw to a hand of straight dynamite.

THE WHISPER that sounded over his hat then was like a monster mosquito, and behind it came the rifle bark somewhere ahead on the rough embankment. For a split second the sound took him to Georgia again, with troops and chaos and blood, and it erased the immobility of the rider like a river bass breaking placid water. Tray ducked low in the saddle, stiffened instantly to take the whirl of the horse, and drove spurs home. He met the angered side-plunge by leaning hard against it in right stirrup, and the second bullet only splashed dry twigs somewhere behind him.

Like a sewed-on piece of the El Paso saddle, the lean man rode low and fast, his face hard set, his brain racing like the flashing hoofs of the startled mustang. A man cannot meet unseen rifle fire with a short range hand gun. As his remuda mustang tore ground away, Tray let the .44 Army model revolver sink back from his fist to holster, and rode.

Blaine was watching him when he loped up to the holding ground, and the Cross L man's dust-powdered, tired features were patient as time.

"No strays over there, Tray?" Blaine called above the herd noise.

"Some." Tray pulled up to Blaine. He pushed his hat back and crossed lean

hands on the saddlehorn to ease his weight. The gray glance that went across to the older man belied his casualness. "Three strays in that cedar brush above the river. And that's not all, Blaine."

His neighbor waited. Tray took steady hands off the saddlehorn and reset his hat.

"There's a dead man in there, too. Shot."

Blaine frowned and stared back. "Who was he? White or Indian?"

Tray shook his head. His voice took on the brittleness of dried mesquite beans. He was hating to tell Blaine what he had to tell him. Friendship will take a lot of strain. But he was pulling on a thin lasso. It looked like he had bad-medicated the Cross L drive from the start.

"Somebody took two potshots at me from toward the river. I couldn't see 'em so I fed spurs to this hiderack and hunted cover. But they were trying."

Blaine's frown deepened. "Did you know the dead man?" he persisted.

"I've seen him before." Tray watched Blaine. "If I'm not mistaken, he's Bolly Mott!"

Blaine stared a long moment, swore softly. "Handsome Billy!" Then he blurted, "Tray, did you do it?"

"I guess somebody saved me the job," Tray drawled. "I wouldn't have done it that way. He was ambushed."

Blaine took the slack out of his reins and faced the thicket.

"Feller, for just one man you sure can manage to get tangled in a lot of stuff. Maybe that law-readin' you did in prison won't be time wasted!"

"Jock Sisco will explode at the seams," Tray voiced his neighbor's thoughts. "But no use saying I feel bad about it. Texas is better off. This country's got to thin out the Mott and Sisco kind, Blaine, if it's ever to amount to a damn!"

"Sisco don't count murder for anything in the Territory, but he'll want to hang

somebody for this one!" Blaine looked off. "And of course, Tray, I've heard how Billy was contestin' you for the Langford girl. She'll wonder where you were when it happened, just like Sisco will. Women are like that."

Tray's mouth went a degree tighter but he said nothing. He saw an image in expensive silks and laces, exquisite as a Dresden doll. Kathryn Langford was the girl he hoped would someday share his pride in his Pecos labors. Kathryn, born to comforts and attention, was not the kind of a girl a man could ask to meet the hardships that now engulfed his Figure 3 spread. This market drive itself, Tray was hoping, would set him up in a way that would let him feel ready to settle things between him and Kathryn.

"Dammit," Blaine spoke without rancor. "If it's not one thing it's another, ain't it?"

TRAY knew what he meant by that and nodded again as they kicked their horses in a circling route toward the thicket. Blaine had let Tray throw in his small herd with the larger outfit for the market drive. Tray's hard-pressed little spread, tucked into a Pecos homesteading corner next to Cross L, had suffered while Tray was in the South in the ranks of the Texas cavalry. A year inside a Pennsylvania stockade as a war prisoner had added more time for his cattle to dwindle, his ranch to run down. In these past few years after coming back, he had been trying to pick up the pieces. Blaine was nearly as hard-pushed, himself, in the post-war turmoil. Their combined herd had been made up and started north on the reports of a lush market in Kansas where the railroad had laid its steel. But it had to be a shoestring drive, slim on men and slim on supplies. Tray and Blaine showed in their faces some of the plague that had ridden along with them on the first lap. The drive toward the Red

had been cursed, first, by sandstorms, then with alkali water, then a stampede. Two of the men had quit the drive below Fort Worth. The chuck wagon had been cap-sized and its contents lost in the flooded Brazos. For three days, the disgruntled, sleepless hands had lived on roasted beef chunks and venison.

"Folks think you might have killed Billy before now, if it hadn't been for Kathryn Langford," Blaine spoke soberly as they rode. "He was a polecat in the war, when he caused you to get captured. And he's been one since, the way he's throwed in with that Sisco crowd that rules the roost up here on the river. But maybe Kathryn thinks he is a nice, handsome gentleman—or was."

Yes, Kathryn would be apt to think just that. Mott's cowardice in action and his panicky judgment that had betrayed a whole scout detachment, resulting in the capture of Tray and some others—she wouldn't know about that. Billy's fine manners and handsome garb and suave talk made him quite a figure back in the Pecos settlements. But Tray didn't want to think further about Kathryn at that moment. Big Jock Sisco and his political stranglehold for trail piracy would have been problem enough up here at the edge of the Territory, without Kathryn to worry about and Billy Mott doubled up dead over there in the brush.

"Angle around this way," Tray directed briefly, taking the lead. "I'd like to keep trees between us and the river. . . I could have struck a match on that first bullet."

BUSH KEETER, the surly Pecos drifter they had hired of necessity at the outset of the drive, was waiting. He faced them, backed by three or four other riders, when Tray and Blaine came back to the herd from viewing Mott's body in the thicket. Blaine suddenly kicked his horse ahead when he saw them.

"What're you men bunched up here for?" he demanded. "This ain't ridin' herd!"

Keeter was thick featured and stupid. A rumble of sullen complaint sloshed out through his coarse beard. "We're damn hungry!" He jerked his shaggy beard toward Tray. "His cattle make twice as much work and he ain't furnishin' no men!"

Tray spurred up to Keeter. The heavy-set rider, at the movement, suspiciously drew a thick hand back toward his gun holster and his burnt-match eyes contracted.

"We been talkin' it over," Keeter mouthed. "Somebody's got to get to hell to Cooke's Store and get us grub, and the size of this herd's got to be cut down. You can sell 'em off to Sisco's outfit—he's buyin' stuff up here for the government. Or we're quittin' the drive here and now!"

"I'm doing my best, Keeter." Tray tried to keep his voice level. "I'm taking the wagon into Cooke's right now for supplies. But you knew the size of this herd when you signed on. I'm paying my part of wages." He faced the others. "You men get back to the cattle before they scatter to hell and gone. Move 'em out to that good grass over east of here. I'll have grub for you by sundown. And one thing more!" He whirled to Keeter. "This crew has got a born trouble-maker among you! One skunk can smell up a county. I'd advise this outfit to do more riding and less listening!"

Keeter bristled in his saddle. Hunger and trail dust may have prodded his temper, but it was born belligerence that swelled up his face and fed bad judgment to his tongue.

"Look who's talkin'!" he leered. "Damn shoestring nester that ain't done nothin' but moon about a pair o' fine legs in a lacy petticoat and throwed 500 more head of scrawny longhorns on us to have to

herd. C'mon, men, we're quittin'—we can damn sure get jobs in the Territory with Sisco!"

At that moment, hoofbeat sounds rattled up from north. A young officer in blue uniform, closely followed by three enlisted men, rode at a fast clip from the mesquite screen that stretched toward Cooke's store.

But Tray was on the ground, and at Keeter's horse. The federal cavalymen slowed to a halt a little way back, sensing tension in the group ahead. One of the trail hands had started to laugh at Keeter's remark, but had cut it off in his throat, seeing Tray's face.

"Get down, Keeter, before I drag you down!"

Keeter lumbered out of the saddle. Madness twisted his face, and his hand fumbled at his holster as boots touched ground. Tray sprang for him. He unleashed a long arm to sweep a smacking fist into Keeter's beard. It was knuckles against a granite wall of a jaw, and the jar was like a knife stab clear to Tray's tall shoulder. Keeter's big head shuddered. Tray lashed at him again, with left fist, with no more effect. Keeter bored in with the dogged fury of a crazed bull. His massive knuckles raked Tray's cheekbone, bringing blood. His right hand kept fumbling for the gun. Tray, with a desperate effort, blindly swung a lightning fist again to the big rider's mouth. Keeter fell back a step, hurt and cursing.

Before his gun came around, Keeter was knocked abruptly aside by the charge of Blaine's horse, and the Cross L boss' sixgun was leveled. "Drop it, Keeter—drop it!" Blaine shouted.

Tray wiped blood from his face with his sleeve and they watched Keeter get to his feet, his gun still on the ground. Tray dumped the rounds from it and flung the gun toward Keeter. He pulled currency and counted out Keeter's pay. There was complete silence as the big rider caught at

his bridle reins and heaved up into the saddle.

"You ain't seen the end of this, Carlson!" he gritted, drilling Tray with a last malevolent glare. They watched him ride away toward Cooke's.

"Anybody else feel like quitting?" Tray turned to the other riders.

"We ain't even figured on it!" Pete Short retorted. "It was just Keeter soundin' off, Tray. We're just hungry, that's all. You an' Blaine are doin' the best you can. We ain't ditchin' you—hell, we're goin' to Kansas with these critters!"

"All right," Blaine spoke up, wearily. "Then let's move this herd east to grass till we find out if we can ford over tomorrow."

* * *

"Hold it a minute!" The cavalryman kicked his horse closer. "I'm Lieutenant Derby, Fifth Cavalry Detachment, stationed at Cooke's Store. You can't graze this herd on East Flat grass. Sorry—but Sisco's sent word that grass is reserved for a Langford herd, 4,000 head, coming up from San Antonio. You'll have to hold where you are."

Tray looked at the Yankee and digested that. The Langford herd would be Double Seven stuff, owned by Seymour Langford, Kathryn's father. Langford operated a rich spread out of San Antonio, as well as other range in the Pecos country. And he was a big man in Texas—big enough to throw weight, both with the Territory officials and in Austin. Tray had heard Langford was collecting stuff on the Cibola for a market trip, but he hadn't guessed the two drives would collide here at the Red.

"If it ain't one damn thing it's another," Blaine mentioned, for the second time within an hour. "I'm John Blaine, Lieutenant, and this here's Tray Carlson. . . He spent the last few months of the war in your country, Pennsylvania

prison camp during the recent fracas."

"Hope you enjoyed your stay, Carlson." Lieutenant Derby's eyes twinkled.

"Wasn't too bad," Tray grinned wryly. "Somebody had stored an old law library in our stockade and I killed time by reading Pennsylvania law from one end of the statutes to the other. But I reckon we're luckier than you, Lieutenant, in some respects—at least we're back home, such as it is."

The young officer grimaced. "You ain't joking, brother."

But Tray was thinking of the herd, and the sparse graze. "Has Sisco got the right to say one herd gets good grass in preference to another?"

"Listen," the Lieutenant spat at the ground, then faced the men with aged lines in a youthful face. "Sisco's got a right to do damn near anything. He's the chief deputy to the Territory commissioner. The commissioner lays up in a St. Louis hotel half the time, drunk as an old goat. And Sisco runs things. I got orders to cooperate with the commissioner's setup. It's politics over my head. The army in Washington doesn't know, or give a damn, that Sisco is forcing little trail herds to sell to him, so he can turn around and use government men to drive on to Kansas and turn 'em at a big profit. And gentlemen, he's got the means of making it mighty painful in the Territory for those that don't play his way!"

TRAY and Blaine looked at one another and Blaine cautiously nodded. Tray flicked back a look of understanding, turned to Derby.

"Lieutenant, there's a dead man over yonder in that thicket." He pointed west. "It's a man we used to know as Billy Mott—understand he's been working up here with Sisco. He was shot."

Lieutenant Derby's forehead wrinkled and his mouth opened.

"Billy Mott! Dead! Damn, he was

alive and his usual obnoxious self in Cooke's Store this morning. . . . You know anything about it?"

"Nope. We figured we'd better report it," Tray kept his voice casual. "You'll probably want to make an investigation, and the body would have been found later, anyway, and you'd know we came through this vicinity. We didn't want to get stopped up in the Territory for a lot of red tape. So we're telling you now. And if you want to look into it, whoever shot Billy also took a couple of tries at me from over in the river roughs."

The lieutenant's eyes were looking curiously at Tray, who suddenly felt he had talked too long. Did the lieutenant already know there had been trouble between him and Billy?

"You practically made an oration, Carlson. Maybe it's those law books you read!" Derby was smiling shrewdly but not unfriendly.

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing. I'd heard you were coming this way, Carlson. Mott, in fact, let it be known at the saloon last night that you're not exactly his best friend. May want to talk with you later."

Lieutenant Derby, face expressionless, abruptly motioned to his men and they galloped westward toward the little stand of cedars.

Tray and Blaine rode with the hands to tighten the herd, and both were worried about the grass. Cold-cash pounds could fall off the cattle if they were delayed long on thin graze, waiting for the river to subside. They avoided mention of either Seymour Langford or Billy Mott. More pressing at the moment was grub for the crew. Tray's own insides gnawed with stark hunger. As soon as the herd was compact for the night, he left Blaine on watch with the men, and headed for Cooke's Store, directing Manuel to follow him in the old Brazos-battered chuck wagon.

CHAPTER TWO

Polecat Firewater

COOKE'S was once the only building there on the banks of the Red. But a town of sorts had sprouted around the weathered store since the war. Riding in on a fresh mount from the remuda, Tray came over a bare sand rise at sundown and looked upon the crimson river and a cluster of pole cabins, several half-dug-outs, cavalymen's tents in a neat row, a few frame structures of raw lumber. It came back to him, in vague recollection of trail gab, that Cooke's had been established by an optimistic early-day buffalo hunter, now dead, but had retained its original name under various ownerships. A family by the name of Garcia, as he remembered, were the present operators and campfire palaver had said they were half Spanish, half Irish, to which somebody inevitably added was like cross-breeding a stiletto to a blunderbuss. As the one store at the crossing, Cooke's supplied trail crews and Territory travelers from a meager grocery stock freighted in from Fort Worth.

He sighted a frame structure from whose bare flag pole he surmised the Stars and Stripes floated in daytime over headquarters for Lieutenant Derby's cavalry detachment. And as he jogged into the red sandy street, he also sighted two shack saloons, a bleak frame jail and court building, the tent postoffice, a squat lumber structure with a crude sign, "Hotel," a few horses at scattered hitch rails. He pulled up and tied back of the log-sided store and his boot heels rattled across the porch, into the gloomy front room.

A bareheaded man, slightly stooped, with black sideburns and an inscrutable dark face, stood at one end of a plank counter. He watched Tray without speaking, his eyes catching dull reflections from the overhead lamp.

Tray approached the swarthy man, and was about to speak a conventional greeting, when the man at the counter murmured coldly:

"You want something, stranger?"

"Damn right!" He felt a needle of irritation at the unfriendly atmosphere of the place. "I'm Tray Carlson, got a trail herd out here from the Pecos. I need coffee, salt pork, flour, beans—"

The man shook his dark head. "We have no supplies for sale. We are out of stock."

"Out of stock! My God, man—we've got to have grub!"

"I'm sorry."

Anger prodded hunger and stirred up hot suspicion inside Tray. He stalked deliberately to an inside door, jerked it open. The overhead light cast shadowy rays into an inner storage room. He saw orderly rows of flour sacks, cases, boxes.

"Out of stock like hell!"

He turned back, scowling and angry. And then he saw the girl.

She blended into the shadows of the side wall like a walnut wood fixture. She was twenty or so, depending on whether you saw her eyes or the bare brown legs planted slightly apart, her feet in plaited calfskin sandals. She was motionless, except for the movement of breath inside a loose, low-hanging blouse, and it and the flared cotton skirt followed her slenderly-curved body as if they were the only garments she wore. Midnight-black hair framed a dark sculptured face from which sultry eyes burned in the darkest liquid-blue depths Tray had ever seen. Her mouth was a wide outline of natural red, set over a chin held at fearless angle. He had the reaction, as he stared, that every fiber in her makeup breathed with live vitality and reckless independence. But back in the smouldering eyes, he thought, was a suggestion of nameless challenge, even inner apprehension. The unexpectedness of finding almost primitive beauty in

the gloomy little store harnessed his gaze for a long moment. He fumbled at his hat brim. Her eyes moved, crinkling the corners at the dark depths in slightly mocking wrinkles. And he knew that he was not the first man to gaze upon her in open-mouthed admiration.

Tray, with an effort, dragged his attention back to the man.

"You run this place?"

"My father does. He is sick now. My brother, Pat, has gone to Fort Worth for supplies. I'm Robert Garcia. This is my sister, Maria."

"I've got to have supplies—my trail hands are starved for grub." Tray pointed toward the warehouse door. "You've got plenty of stock!"

"Jock Sisco this morning contracted for every pound of food on hand."

"Sisco! Is he here in Cooke's?"

"He acted through his representative," Garcia mumbled.

"Billy Mott?"

GARCIA nodded. Both he and his sister seemed waiting for something. The girl was still standing with feet apart, lightly held on slender hips. The smoulder inside her liquid dark eyes unyieldingly held to the tall trail man. Tray had difficulty in getting his thoughts in order. The crew had to have supplies—that was all there was to *that*!

He turned back to Garcia. "But Billy Mott's dead! You'll hear it before the night's over—surely you can sell me a little stuff out of what he ordered for Sisco!"

The girl spoke. "But Senor Sisco's orders are the law here at the river, Tray Carlson! He bought. We sold. That is all!" She flung hands apart expressively. The words showed a flash of white teeth and he had known her voice would be musically sultry like that, to match eyes and skin. But he had not known that it would saturate him as it did, warmly bath-

ing his whole thing, putting a thin tingle coursing in every rib and vein.

He tried to get his mind back to Blaine, to the hungry trail riders. There was no other store at Cooke's. Without supplies, and plenty of them, the drive was doomed. His Pecos ranch hung on that slender a thread. Why would Sisco, this same day, buy up every morsel of food in Garcia's stock? Was it deliberately done, to hamstring the Cross L drive? For a moment, he was tempted to try to bribe Garcia, though his and Blaine's cash was at low ebb. Then something else tried to inch into his brain. Something was wrong here. Something that had been said or not said.

Billy Mott! He had told them Billy was dead. Yet these two had not so much as flicked one of their long eyelashes, had not asked a single natural question.

"I said Billy Mott is dead," he squinted hard at Garcia. "He was shot. Did you already know that?"

"No!" Garcia spoke too quickly. Tray had seen many a war prisoner interrogated, had listened to their bland lying. "I had not heard. I cannot truthfully say that I am sorry. It is too bad it happened."

Was that a trace of sudden crimson high-lighting the girl's deep olive cheekbones? Tray was not sure. She had swung about, moving with a lithe grace that suggested a creekside willow in a whisper of breeze. She planted a careless elbow upon the counter and faced the door, ignoring the men. Tray looked back quickly. He caught the veiled movement of Garcia's glance. The man had flicked an involuntary look at the rifle leaning in the corner next to the inner door.

Tray could almost see the truth materialize and stand tangible before them all in the silent room. He took quick steps and caught up the long-barrelled rifle. Garcia moved, cat-like, but seconds too late. He froze, with arm half extended.

The three of them were so still in that moment that the Texan could hear the wheeze of the lamp flame, feel the hair-spring tension in three coiled minds.

He looked down at the weapon in his hands. He broke the rifle and up-ended the barrel toward the lamp, put his eye to it. Billy Mott's arrogant face might as well have been engraved at the open end.

"Good rifles should be cleaned after firing, Garcia!" Tray spoke very softly. "Did you do a little hunting this afternoon—over on the river roughs, by chance?"

"Get out, get out!" The girl suddenly was a dusky panther. She flung herself with untamed grace in her muscles, confronting Tray within inches, looking up in fiery challenge. "Talk, talk, talk! What you come talking riddles for, Tray Carlson? Go now!" She stomped a sandaled foot. "We must close the store. I must get supper for my brother, and my father, who is sick!"

"My trail hands are sick, too, *mucha-cha amable!* Sick from hunger." He looked down into the smouldering blue depths and a sardonic smile touched his mouth. "We would eat our empty chuck wagon but we cannot fry its rancid hide without lard for searing and hot Ancho peppers to burn out the Brazos taste.

Billy Mott would have laughed to see me starve," he added, watching her. "But Senor Mott met hard luck. Some sneaking buck, on the prowl from a Territory tribe, I think, waylaid and shot Billy Mott, probably to rob him of horse and saddle.

Yes, I am sure that is the way it must have been!"

She continued to confront him with flashing spirit. But, he thought, something was changed, the burst of hostility was quickly cooling.

"I was almost a witness," Tray went on, cold and grim now at the memory of how close that bullet had come. "That Comanche shot at me, too. Why he did, I don't know."

There was another weighty silence. Then Garcia spoke from far off. "Perhaps, senor, this Indian mistakenly took you for someone else. For a friend of Mott's, perhaps. Someone like Hook Evans, who rides often with Mott, a bully and a dangerous man. A Sisco man."

Tray wore a poker face. He knew that he had the story. He knew, as sure as he stood in that shadowy room, that Robert Garcia's dark eye had been glued down the rifle sight when Billy Mott died, and that Garcia had fired at Tray, too, believing he was Mott's sidekick. And that, somehow, the shooting traced back to involve Maria. Did it stem from trouble between Mott and the girl? Knowing Handsome Billy as he did, he could believe that. The proud Kathryn Langford, he thought wryly, would have been powerfully shocked if she knew the lusty barracks legends about Billy that Tray knew.

Garcia's expression and voice changed noticeably. "You are in a tough fix, Carlson. You have no food at all?"

"Not a pound! And on top of that, Garcia, there're certain people who may think that I shot Handsome Billy!"

Maria turned impulsively toward her brother. Tray thought that she was about to speak, but her words never came. Booted feet rattled across the entrance. Two men, pale in the smoky lamplight, seemed to twist toward them like fire-blinded muskrats.

"You Tray Carlson, from the Cross L herd?" The chunky one spoke through oddly twisted lips.

Tray catalogued the cut of their gun holsters, seeing the way the crooked-mouth man held his right hand along his leg. He knew the stripe. If there ever was a pair of hired guns, there they were before him. It was written in the black eyes, in every line of garb and features.

"Jock Sisco and Lieutenant Derby want to see you," the spokesman poked a thumb toward the street. "You better drag it

over there to the cavalry office pronto."

"Hook Evans." The mutter came from Garcia. Tray sensed that he was trying to convey that this had been Billy Mott's handy man.

"What do they want to see me about? I've got a cattle herd to look after and a bunch of hungry hands riled for their supper!"

"They'll tell you," Hook Evans mumbled. His silent companion looked blankly at Tray, absently hitched his gun belt, then let his stare work brazenly on the girl.

"All right. Tell 'em I'll be along, but I can't palaver all night!"

They drifted back out to the night, with Hook Evans looking back over his shoulder to rake dead eyes across Maria Garcia. She flung her head scornfully, turned away, and whispered something to her brother.

"Have your wagon come to the back door," Garcia spoke in low voice. "I'll supply your crew, Carlson. We know that Sisco bought up our stock to cripple you. He has done this before."

"Thanks, Garcia—both of you." He looked back from the door. "More I think of it, *amigos*, the more I think I actually saw that buck Indian tear out of that thicket!"

Garcia was reaching for the rifle, a cleaning rod already in his hand. Tray's last look was for Maria. She faced him with dark eyes no longer stormy. He touched the brim of his sombrero to her, and her white teeth glistened briefly in response, a half-wistful smile touching her lips.

"Tray Carlson," she whispered huskily, "please watch! You will find Jock Sisco is nobody to play games!"

"I don't play games either, Maria,"

OUTSIDE, he gave instructions to Manuel who had patiently waited at the chuck wagon. Then he headed in long

strides for Lieutenant Derby's headquarters. At least Blaine and the trail hands soon would have their supper. Hot food, biscuits, plenty of coffee, would make a big difference in the temper of the crew. His own empty stomach gnawed unceasingly, but that would have to wait. Jock Sisco was next. It was a part of the hurdle he and Blaine had known they might have to make here at the edge of the Territory. Hook Evans and his companion emerged from the street shadows and fell in behind him.

He first saw the pock-marked jowls and dab of mustached ugliness that was the face of Jock Sisco; then, to one side, the young federal officer. Sisco filled in fat layers the best chair in the pine-smelling room, his stumpy fingers nervously working upon the packing case that served for a desk. Further back in the shadows, his face unreadable, the Union lieutenant carelessly lounged.

"You're Carlson." Sisco's bullfrog croak rumbled out with no preliminaries. He shifted his flabby bulk, taking in Tray with pale, darting eyes over a red beaked nose. He talked with impatient gestures of face and hands. Tray had him sized immediately.

"Your herd's too big for the amount of grass it's on." He spoke in rapid, moist words. His white eyes darted everywhere in the room, his mind seemingly detached from his tongue. "Got to cut it down. You're out of supplies, too."

"Yeah, I found the stock at the store had been bought up this afternoon," Tray said dryly.

Sisco ignored that. "I'm buying cattle for the tribes in the Territory. I'll take half your stuff off your hands at four dollars a head. You'll have a better chance of getting the balance of 'em to market. We'll cut 'em out at daylight. Hook," he raised his voice and searched out the pair at the door, "you and Thomas get some hands ready to take over part of the

Cross L herd. Make sure that East Flat grass is cleared and ready for Langford's herd coming tomorrow."

"Hold your horses, Sisco." Tray faced the heavy man from across the sputtering lamp. "It takes two to make a trade. You're not buying a damn' head of our stuff at four dollars. We're not reducing that herd by a single hide. We'll cross when the river's down and be out of Langford's way, if that's what's worrying you, though I fail to see any God-given priorities on good grass for him. And we'll take our chances on getting through the Territory."

Sisco puffed like yeast to his full height, a massive, cotton-bale figure. His never-idle fingers toyed with the edges of a black gun belt that swung an ornate revolver. His vagrant eyes stopped their meanderings to rest on the chin of the trail man.

"Carlson, we've done business with a lot of herd bosses, all kinds. I've heard every threat in the book, seen 'em struggle and bellyache and mouth. But they usually wind up wishing they'd done business my way. I've got the government's interest to look after. And I've got Union troops to back me." He motioned pompously to the lieutenant. Derby's gaze held negligently to his boots.

Tray laughed grimly. His scorn brought the first live expression to the pudgy face across from him. It was a fleeting trace of bared brutality.

"Government interests! Where in hell is government interest, Sisco, when the beef you buy at four dollars ends up in Kansas under your own trail brand at twenty dollars a round?"

Sisco froze. The cactus mustache twitched. "Carlson, one of my chief assistants—Billy Mott, a highly respected man was murdered today. In a thicket, I might add, near the place where you were riding herd. It is known that bad feelings existed between you and Mott. Do I make myself clear?"

"There are two schools of thought on how highly respected a man Billy Mott was," Tray replied tersely. "I don't speak evil of the dead. I will only say that I knew Mott under other circumstances. But I don't necessarily kill every man I happen to dislike."

"So far," Sisco went on, as if Tray had not spoken, "neither the military nor the civil law has acted. But you could be a prime suspect, Carlson. We are trying to re-establish law and civilized procedure in this scurvy country." Tray watched, almost amused, as the fat official inhaled importantly on the load of bald hypocrisy. "I would hate to see you arrested, to languish in irons in our hot little jail, perhaps for months. Until a circuit judge came along to try you for murder!"

"I would hate that, too, Sisco," Tray returned, gazing coldly at the flesh hill three feet across the table. "I was in the Confederate cavalry, also a lieutenant," he bowed slightly toward the silent Derby, "and I had the unhappy experience of being captured and confined in a war prison in this ex-enemy officer's country. I developed a strong distaste for being locked up. I will be blunt, Sisco—I don't intend to look through iron bars again."

"I have made myself clear," Sisco rumbled impatiently.

* *

Yes, it was clear, Tray thought. It was high-handed, it was gun-in-back blackmail, but it was clear. And for all his brave talk, he knew that he could not beat the pat hand of power in the pudgy fist across the table. Sisco could cause Tray, maybe other Cross L men, to be arrested. Meantime, the herd would be scattered, the drive disrupted, spelling ruin for both him and Blaine.

Evans and Thomas moved up close behind Tray. Lieutenant Derby looked from his boots, up to the ceiling. It must have been as gagging to the trooper, Tray

thought, as it was to him and his men.

"The chief commissioner will be able to find me after we cross into the Territory, if he wants to talk to me about it." Tray tried to keep his words cool. "There's no evidence to connect me with Mott's death, and you know it."

"The commissioner is in St. Louis," Sisco rumbled arrogantly. He moved out, in short, jerky motions. "I am empowered to act in his absence. I have authority to handle things as I see fit. Don't make it extra rough on yourself and your partner. It's a long distance up that trail!"

Sisco stalked to the door, each board creaking under his step. Hook Evans and Thomas fell in behind him. A sentry backed out of their path.

"Talk to your partner, Carlson," Sisco croaked final words without looking back. "Sleep over it—and see me at the hotel early tomorrow. I will not have time to argue. Seymour Langford and his daughter are coming in ahead of their herd, to make arrangements for grass and fording. I will be busy. I will spare you just five minutes!"

Kathryn Langford coming here to Cooke's! The news of that hit Tray almost as hard as the threat left dangling by Sisco. He could not be sure whether his reaction was surprised pleasure, or uneasy irritation, nor did he know why Maria Garcia's throaty voice warmly lingered in his mind.

He turned to Lieutenant Derby and bitterness drenched his words. "And it was country like this we fought over, Derby!" He had to get a bead drawn on the federal, if he could; had to know, if possible, just where Derby stood in this gullet-choking grip Jock Sisco held on the cattle route. Derby remained silent. Tray tried to probe further. "Honest men fight the wars—and a big bag of political scum like that Territory scavenger comes along to cash in the blue chips! I'm past backing down, Derby. It's everything or nothing

with me." His voice became icy.

"That herd's your last chance, eh, Carlson? Your ranch hanging on it?"

"Right. But it's more than that. Down here, Derby, you have to beat the rattlesnakes out of a clearing before you pitch your camp in it. You cut out the briars and stinkweed before you build your dug-out house. This is going to be a good country, but folks have got to clean it up as they go along. They've got to make it fit for the development that some day will come along behind them. Without access to a cattle market, Lieutenant, Texas is a goner. But it's too big and too promising to let a few men hogtie it, like the Sisco breed is doing."

Lieutenant Derby studied the trail man with unfathomable thoughts. Then he turned to the sentry. "Corporal, hike over to the mess tent and tell Cullen to fix up a big plate of hot food. Bring it back here. You can't buck Sisco's gang on an empty stomach, Carlson. And I understand you've been without grub for a spell."

Tray relaxed. He felt for tobacco.

"While your chow is coming," Derby added, "let's move over to the Quicksand Saloon and I'll stand you a drink. It's not much to look at—but the firewater they dish out will maybe take the polecat tastes out of our mouths."

They headed across the street. Tray took a satisfying drag on the tight-rolled smoke. He thought he had his answer.

CHAPTER THREE

The Last Texan

JOCK SISCO stood in the center of the best room afford by the one-story slab-sided hotel, a cheroot clamped between his small, sharp teeth, fat frown layers riding his forehead. The crooked shade was pulled down against the thin moonlight outside, and the unfinished wood-

slab door was closed, but neither of them shut off the ruffled effects left by his recent contact with the upstart trail man from the Pecos. Being a man who wore his authority and official powers in garish dabs, like a paint-splotched Comanche, Sisco smarted where his flashy self-importance had been dented by a mere cowpoke, who had no more than 500 range longhorns to his name.

It might be he would have to make an example of that Tray Carlson. If Carlson successfully bucked Sisco's setup here at the crossing and in the Territory, others would be encouraged to follow suit. Yes—it would be fatal to very lucrative, ego-satisfying operations, if the Cross L trail herd ran rough-shod over Sisco's demands.

Blaine, the partner—he was an older man. And he would crack more quickly without Carlson to side him. Blaine had a bigger herd. He would be willing to settle the cheapest way and head on to market.

So it seemed to tally up to one thing: Get rid of Carlson. And on the note of that decision, Sisco heard Hook Evans' voice at the door. He rumbled: "Come in!"

"That feller Keeter's been back, pesterin' me for a job," Hook informed. "He's mad at the Cross L outfit. You want to hire him?"

Sisco had nearly forgotten the surly, shifty trail hand who had approached him earlier, mouthing that he had quit the Cross L drive. And suddenly, Sisco saw a use for Keeter. The man patently was stupid, mean, disgruntled. He had let Sisco know he relished "getting even" with Tray Carlson.

"Tell Keeter we can use him," Sisco ordered. "But tell him this, Hook—let him understand it depends on what happens to that man Carlson. If Carlson should happen to taste a bullet tonight, then Keeter will have a job with us. The pay will be ample."

"I get you, boss."

"Put it to him so it'll sink in, Hook. He's thick as an ox. But see that he catches on. And one thing more—if Keeter fails, I want you to finish the job. Understand?"

"I could do it in the first place, Jock," the twisted mouth worked nervously.

"I'd rather keep my regular men out of it," Sisco grumbled. "I'm not too certain about that cavalry officer. He might get squeamish ideas. No—it'll be better if that jug-head Keeter does the job for us. . . Now, what about Billy? What have you learned about that? Was it Garcia?"

Hook evaded his boss' cold stare. "Yeah—I'm pretty sure it was. I reckon Billy and I made a mistake."

"You did!" Sisco rumbled angrily, and Hook twitched at the tone. He knew the brutality, the wanton disregard for life, means and methods, that boiled close under the fat facade of the Territory czar. "Billy couldn't leave the girl alone, and you sided him. I warned you both. Those Garcias are the kind that'll kill quicker over something like that than anything else! What happened—did Billy get fired up and try strong-arm?"

Hook's lips labored as he tried to form the answer, but Sisco cut in impatiently. "Never mind, don't tell me. Hell, I can guess at it. Billy over-stretched himself and the girl told her brother, or else he saw it. And he went gunning for Billy.

Let it be a lesson to you. This business and women don't mix worth a damn!"

"You ain't gonna let Garcia get away with it?" Hook whined. "On top of that, I just found out he sold that Carlson a load of supplies after you'd closed down on the stock in the store."

Sisco cursed at that. "Get him locked up!" he snapped. "Dig out that fossil-brained town marshal and swear out a warrant, or fake one yourself. Tell Lieutenant Derby I expect military law to

back it up. We'll charge Garcia with disposing of government property—then we'll get busy up in the Territory and let him rot in that damn calaboose."

Hook nodded understanding and backed out of the room. Sisco savagely jerked the cork from a bottle and up-ended the burning whiskey to his bulging lips. It fired him down to the middle and he smacked appreciation. He'd get rid of Carlson by using Keeter. And he'd get revenge for Billy without actually having to charge Garcia with murder. That way, the girl angle would be left out of it and his report would look a lot better in Washington. Billy had lost his head over that dusky Maria Garcia. Sisco grimaced—he knew that no woman would look at him, because he was fat, ugly, repulsive. He hated them all, in return, and he couldn't say that he particularly gave a damn that Billy had got himself killed over a girl. Billy was too handsome, anyhow. And he had stopped a bullet for his weakness. Sisco got faint, perverted satisfaction out of that, and tilted the bottle again.

WHEN Tray left Lieutenant Derby's headquarters, reinforced by his big meal of hot army food, the night was well advanced. He realized the need to hurry back to the herd. The thin moonlight had been blotted out by swabs of low, black clouds. He was due to relieve Blaine at midnight, to ride watch on the cattle till dawn.

The straggling settlement was dark, the meandering street deserted. Tray cut diagonally toward the trees back of the store, two hundred yards away, where he had left his horse. Only the sounds of his booted feet in the soft sandy ruts broke the dark stillness.

The blast of a heavy gun ripped the night apart with thunderous violence, and the stab of powder fire that flashed from against the log-sided store seemed to Tray to leap toward him, across space, and stab

the flesh of his left forearm. He heard, somewhere, a low cry. He knew, even as he whirled in a crouch, gun already springing into right fist, that the slug had grazed him, that he was ambushed.

A second shot roared after the first, but there was no sound or touch of bullet this time. Instead, snarling curses sounded from the darkness ahead, and the noise of a struggle. Then he was running toward those sounds, because, mixed with the cursing of a man he heard throaty, desperate cries. Twisting shadows scraped against the store side and the voice he heard sent chills of apprehension along his spine.

One of the struggling shadows was abruptly flung from the other and went sprawling into the weeds. He knew it was Maria Garcia. She was out of his range, and he could fire, and his .44 bucked and roared, and roared again. The big bulk in the darkness staggered, and once more powder fire flashed from it, throwing sand from the ground, and then the gasping bulk fell heavily.

"Maria—Maria!" Tray ran toward her. She scrambled to her feet. All at once she was clinging to him, desperately, and his hands held her shoulders.

"I—I came to try to warn you, Tray! He was waiting here. I caught his arm, I fought him, and bit my teeth into his arm—I was afraid I was too late!"

"You did all right," Tray said fervently. "You just saved my life, that's all."

He stooped low to look at the still body. "Bush Keeter! He was one of our riders till he quit today."

Somebody was advancing from the direction of the cavalry office. Tray made a quick decision. He had killed Keeter in self-defense. But if he got entangled in technicalities, it would involve Maria too, and he might never get untangled—especially with Jock Sisco's fine hand in the background of the episode. Let them find

Keeter as he lay, gun in hand, three empty chambers. That would tell enough.

He caught Maria's hand and ran toward the back of the store. He made for brushy shadows, reached his horse.

"Go to your home, Maria," he whispered. "Quick as you can go! Nobody will ever—"

"But that is not all!" She fearfully clutched his hand. "They say that you must die, Tray Carlson! If not by that man, then Hook Evans himself will do it. And they plan to arrest my brother for letting you have supplies. It is Jock Sisco and his men—it is no use to fight against them! We must get away from this place forever!"

"How did you learn all this?"

"Robert. He heard them. He has been afraid since he—since what happened to Billy Mott. And more afraid after he let you have supplies, afraid that somebody would know. He watched Hook Evans go to the hotel. Robert slipped to the window of Sisco's room, because he was worried and afraid. He heard them plan to have this man kill you."

TRAY grimly untied his horse, tightened the cinch. He had to get to Blaine and the cattle.

"How can Sisco do it?" Maria was asking. "Can't we tell his plot to the soldiers? Get him arrested?"

"It would only be Robert's word against Sisco's," Tray said. "No use. And there's that Billy Mott matter, too. . . Tell me, will you, about Mott. Did he—was it because of you, Maria?"

Her voice came, hesitant and low. "His attentions were repulsive to me. He became angered. And once Robert warned him, but he laughed, and slapped Robert. And Hook Evans was just as bad. They stopped me one day, when I was riding along the river, alone. And Mott was drunk, and he became mean when I tried to get away. And he—he seized me and I

fought him, and Hook Evans stood and laughed, and I hit Billy Mott and scratched and bit him and finally I broke away. Robert knew, and began to watch his chance. That is why—that is how it happened."

She felt the blood on his sleeve and with a sharp exclamation she fumbled for his neckerchief and bound the wound.

Tray rode back to camp over rough country, half a mile east of the main trail. It was in his mind that Hook Evans might try to finish the job Keeter had fumbled. He found Blaine in the dark, riding herd, and told him what had happened at Cooke's Store.

"Then the showdown is tomorrow," Blaine spoke slowly when Tray had finished. "We're either to cut out some of these cattle for Sisco—or fight him clear across the Territory, is that it?"

"That's about it," Tray confirmed.

"Might be the cheapest way out in the long run," Blaine mumbled.

Tray peered sharply across at him in the darkness. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I'd rather lose a few cows than the whole herd," Blaine said defensively.

Was Blaine weakening? Tray stared at his neighbor in the darkness.

"It's not a few cows—it's a hell of a lot of cows. And even more than that. It's blackmail, it's buzzards at a carcass. Blaine, it'll ruin every cowman in Texas if somebody doesn't start fighting it now. My God, man, you wouldn't give in to that fat slob, would you?"

"Sisco's the government up here," Blaine spoke wearily. "We're half under federal rule, half under occupation army, and a little of Texas law, all mixed up. Too damn much law and no justice. He'll have you behind bars, Tray, sure as shoot-in'! Hell, man, haven't you had enough?"

A strained silence spread tautly between them, and they left the issue dangling that way, as Blaine rode off for the night camp

and a little sleep. Tray kicked his horse angrily, disappointed with Blaine, beginning to feel, somehow, that he fought almost lone-handed. Then, in the back of his mind, formed the memory of the voice and the touch of Maria Garcia, and hovering over that was the picture of Kathryn Langford who would be coming into Cooke's sometime in the morning. He circled the herd, singing low songs to quiet the nervous ones, checking the locations of the other night riders, hearing their grinning words of thanks in the dark for the supplies the chuck wagon had brought. Maybe by this time tomorrow, Tray grimly told himself, they wouldn't be feeling so good about it.

TRAY and Blaine loped their mustangs toward Cooke's when the sun was first breaking the river tree-line far to the east, and the strain still rode between them. They had studied his friend with quick side-glances during their dawn breakfast at the wagon. But he could not fathom Blaine, could not guess how far the Cross L man would side him when the chips went down with Jock Sisco.

"Langford's Double Seven stuff!" Blaine spoke gruffly, jerking a thumb southward. Tray had already seen the low dust speck. The big herd from Santone would that day move into the good grass on the East Flat and be ready for the crossing.

"You say Kathryn's coming up here with her old man?" Blaine asked.

"So Sisco said," Tray replied shortly.

The silence descended again and continued as they came down the sand rise into Cooke's wandering main street.

A small group of men filed out to the street from the shack hotel.

"That's Sisco, the fat one," Tray spoke in low tones to Blaine. "And that's Hook Evans beside him—the one that Maria Garcia said was due to take care of me if Bush Keeter failed."

"This war is not as big as the other one. But it's important, Blaine. Maybe it was a good thing that we lost that one—but we're sunk, Texas is sunk, unless this trail is free and open. I didn't start out to clean up the trail, but it looks like it kinda got forced on us."

Blaine listened, but said nothing, and then they were on the ground, facing Sisco and Hook Evans and the others.

"Arrest that man, Hook!"

The words blasted out from Jock Sisco, freighted with rage. A fat left finger pointed at Tray Carlson. Sisco's right hand clamped the stock of his sixgun in the showy holster.

Evans' fingers already were hovering an inch from his gun butt. The rest of Sisco's crew was spread out slightly, hard eyes on Tray.

Tray knew, then, what he had to do. They would have him, either way. He heard, too, but did not turn to see, the distant clatter of the buckboard bearing down upon the town from the south ridge behind a black team in a red dust cloud.

"Arrest me for what?" He faced the Territory boss, feet planted, the edge of an eye on Hook Evans' right hand.

"For waylayin' and murderin' Bush Keeter!" Sisco snarled. "You can't get away with high-handed murder like that here, Carlson!"

"Is Hook Evans an officer on the Texas side?"

"He sure as hell is!" Sisco puffed hoarsely. "Bishop, the town marshal, swore him in as deputy! And since Bishop is sleeping off a drunk, as usual, Evans is taking you to jail—and you'll rot there!"

Tray whipped a quick look to Hook Evans. The twisted lips were parted. The blank killer stare was in Evans' eyes. Blaine was holding his reins, off to one side, out of range. Tray looked back to Sisco.

"Nope. Evans is not arresting me,

Sisco. He can't be sworn in as an officer on the Texas side. He's not an official resident. It's the law."

"He's resisting arrest, Hook!" Sisco bellowed, a crazed madness contorting his face. "Let him have it!"

They caught the first motion of Hook Evans' gun hand. It was fast as an eye-wink, and sure, but Tracy had a fraction of a second's advantage, because he had known what he was going to do. His own right fingers whipped up, and the draw, the instantaneous triggering, were faster than Hook's. The muzzle of his black gun thundered at his hip, and flared out again before Hook Evans' forefinger jerked. Hook's only bullet sliced the outside of Tray's boot, but Hook would never in that world know he had been outdrawn by a faster man. Hook was bloody in the shirt front, sagging and dead. His body became a still bundle in the street.

Tray sprang back to whip his muzzle back and forth across them. "Keep your hands out!" he shouted. "Out, way out—there's more of this for anybody that moves!"

Blaine's own gun was out of holster, and backing him, although the Cross L man looked frightened, undecided. Then the buckboard wheels rattled behind them, a team pulled up. A loud voice called out.

"What the hell goes on here! Carlson! Tray Carlson! What're you—!"

"Tray!" A woman's high voice cut off the first. Tray risked a quick backward look. The tall figure of Seymour Langford was leaping to the street, and cautiously following behind him, silk skirts lifted above trim, expensively-shod feet, was Kathryn.

Jock Sisco dropped his hand away from his gun and moved forward importantly.

"You stopped him just in time, Mister Langford," Sisco spoke hoarsely. "See if you can calm this fool—he's gone loco!" murdering people in cold blood. The man's crazy!"

"TRAY, what kind of business is this?" Langford demanded. "Haven't you got enough trouble with your own herd without picking a scrap in town like a bar-room hoodlum!"

Kathryn advanced to Tray's side in a flutter of silk and startled little words.

"Tray! Why do you get into a brawl like this! And just when I was coming into town to see you, too!"

"I didn't exactly choose it, Kathryn," a sardonic smile accompanied his look down at her. She flung her head up in obvious displeasure. "It was this—or be killed by that fat bandit's hired gun. "Or," he added curtly, "fry in the calaboose while he stole my trail herd!"

"He murdered another man last night!" Sisco spoke rapidly to Langford, a note of respect in his coarse croak as he looked up at the tall ranchman. "And one thing more, Langford—we're pretty certain he ambushed and killed Billy Mott!"

"We heard about that," Langford said.

Tray waited, a grim half-smile playing at the corners of his mouth, eyes level on Kathryn. What was going to be her reaction to Billy's death?

"Why did you do it?" she cried impulsively, a horrified hand half out-stretched. "Tray—why did you kill Billy? Why couldn't you play the—the—game fair and square!"

A soft, husky voice unexpectedly came from behind him. It broke the tense silence, and sent warmth coursing in Tray even before he saw her.

"Perhaps, lady, it may be that the river fog is heavy, that all things are not plain to see here on the Red River. Some mornings," Maria advanced slowly, until she stood almost touching him, "the fog lies so heavy that we must wait a little while, until the sun breaks through. And then we can see things as they are. We do not try to guess, until we can see, and that way—we avoid hasty mistakes."

"Let's get down to business!" Seymour

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Langford broke in impatiently. "I want to talk to you about the crossing, Sisco. But first, what's the lay on Carlson? Is he under arrest for these murders?"

Sisco spoke in feigned reluctance. "He has killed two of my men, Langford, probably three. He has been a trouble-maker ever since he hit the river. He must be held in jail, so that the law can take its course."

"I tried to get you to throw your cattle in with mine and go to work for me," Langford grumbled. "You can't get anywhere like this—but you were too stubborn to take my offer!"

Sisco was quick to sense his advantage. "Take that man to jail, Lieutenant!"

"I'll take him, Sisco," Derby said coolly. "But my orders are simply to see that civil law is properly re-established here. You'll have to get your complainants, witnesses, and charges all properly arranged. He'll be due a hearing."

"Don't worry!" Sisco retorted. "I'm ready! We've got enough on him to hang him three times!"

THE combination court room and jail occupied a long, narrow one-story structure. A few wooden benches, at the front, faced a pine-lumber table that served as judge's bench. At the desk, his feet cocked upon it, a chunky man with droopy eyes and raw-meat face watched them enter.

"Sisco's judge," Derby murmured. "He acts as justice of peace. He'll book you and you'll sweat inside this rat nest until a circuit judge comes along."

Derby went tersely through the booking. Judge Badger wrote in labored words upon a yellowed sheet of paper, then unlimbered, fumbled for keys.

"That makes two in here," he mumbled. "Business picking up."

Derby watched as Tray disappeared through an inner door, ahead of Badger. The door closed. Badger returned.

TEXAS LAW COMES LOADED!

"Hearing will be next week, Lieutenant," he grunted, aiming a tobacco broadside at a distant box, and missing. "Providing Sisco's ready."

"Thank you, Judge," the trooper said blandly. "Justice in your court works with the well-oiled mechanism of a sick turtle."

In the dim room with the two high, barred little windows, Tray squinted in surprise at the other prisoner.

"Robert Garcia! When did this happen?"

"Just before daylight, Carlson. Sisco's men came, four of them, and broke into our house. They say I am charged with disposing of government goods."

The afternoon wore away, hot and silent. Dusk drifted in and closed the barred windows with early shadows.

Tray dozed, awakened briefly, then dozed again. Suddenly he was wide awake. A scratching noise sounded against the wall outside.

"Tray! Tray Carlson. . . Robert. . . Robert!" The whispered words floated in from the night.

"Listen carefully, Tray and Robert!" Her low whisper came to their straining ears. "In the morning, when Robert has his hearing, you are to somehow get into the court room, Tray. In there with Robert. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you, Maria! What then?"

"Blaine—he only told me to let you know that there are law books in there. He said to tell you to remember that. The law books. In a shelf in the court room."

Tray listened, puzzled. He remembered he had seen a shelf of worn and dusty legal volumes in a corner of the court.

"Blaine said," Maria's whisper came again, "that you must be a good, fast lawyer."

He was about to speak again when the whisper, softer now, came hurriedly. "That is all he said. Somebody comes!"



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TWO DOZEN men sat upon the wooden benches, watching the proceedings, when Robert Garcia was brought into court for a hearing at 10 a. m. Judge Badger settled his boots on the table, tobacco making a walnut lump in his red jaw. Tray realized, when he looked over the hard-eyed spectators, that they were Sisco's men. Jock Sisco was planted at Badger's desk. Blaine was not in sight. In fact, Tray saw with bitter emotion, not a single Cross L man was present. It was Sisco's show, all the way.

Then a cavalryman hurried in at the front door, boots rattling loudly in the momentary silence. He peered down front for Derby, moving rapidly toward the officer.

"Indian alarm beyond Pilot Point, sir!" he crisply reported. "Two settler families reported killed. Big war party on the move!"

"Get the men ready to ride immediately, sergeant!" Derby snapped.

A rumble of excited talk swept over the courtroom. In that brief buzz of excitement, Derby moved close to Tray.

"We got to ride, Carlson. Every man of us. There won't be a soldier left in town." He stared straight into Tray's puzzled eyes without expression. "Not a soldier here, maybe for days. Good luck, Lieutenant!" Derby half saluted. And in that gesture, to Tray's surprise, Derby did a peculiar thing. His left eyelid dipped briefly in a cautious wink. Then, frozen faced, he turned, waved a hand to Sisco, and rushed for the street.

THE MEN crowded to the front, watched until the cavalry unit rattled at a gallop for the west. Then they came back into the room.

"Hell, let's get this over with," Sisco stormed. "We're wasting time—Langford and his daughter expect me at their camp by noon."

"Just one thing more, Judge," Tray's

TEXAS LAW COMES LOADED!

palms were sweaty, and a hot thorn seemed to move up and down his spine. "I'd like to quote you a little law from the statutes, that applies in this case."

He moved in slow, easy steps, past the judge's table, on to the book shelf. Judge Badger watched sleepily, Sisco with bloated impatience.

"I think it's this volume here," Tray spoke, trying to be casual.

"For God's sake, Badger, we haven't got time to hear a lot of law reading!" Sisco bellowed.

"Let's hang him now!" somebody jeered. "Let 'im read a tight rope!"

Tray reached a long wrist back into the dark space left by the heavy books. "This is a couple of old Texas laws," Tray looked quickly back over his shoulder. "I just want you to listen, gentlemen. It says: *Keep your damn hands away from your guns—or you're dead!*"

He whirled then, his hands flashed out from the bookcase, and two black .44 six-guns appeared as if by magic, levelling upon the room.

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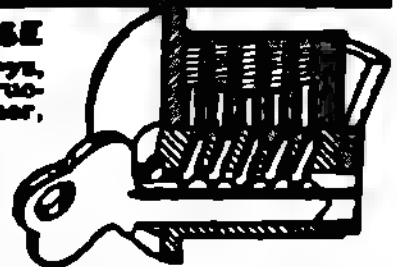
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.44 WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Out the window, Garcia!" Tray snapped. "Quick. Hit and keep running!"

Garcia was streaking ahead of him through the red sand. Tray followed, but a volley of gunfire blasted from the courtroom door. Fiery pain knifed into the hard muscle in the back of his right thigh.

Something smacked him in the shoulder with a terrific force, knocking him flat, his open mouth tasting sand. He twisted about, shuddering from the white pain, and looked through eyes that were hazy now, searching the building for a living target. It was in that moment that the fat, square figure of Jock Sisco was momentarily framed in the window. Sisco's massive arm was extended, his gun stretched in slow, deliberate aim, the face behind it creased in ridges of murderous concentration. Tray steadied himself upon right elbow, seeing Sisco as if in a mist, and slowly worked his right forefinger. Sisco for a split second was immobile. Then he folded, very slowly, at the waist, until his heavy shoulders and arms sagged across the window.

Agas later, it seemed, or it may have been only a year, or a week, or two days, the sand under him came alive.

"Where are we?" Tray murmured, trying to turn his head.

"Way up in the Territory, now," Blaine squatted close to the blankets. You been riding in a supply wagon, Tray. We threw in with Langford and we'll make it."

"You—you joined that fight, didn't you, Blaine? Seems like I heard—"

"Yeah, we were all set out there!" Blaine's voice was grim.

"And what about—," he had started to say the name of Maria Garcia.

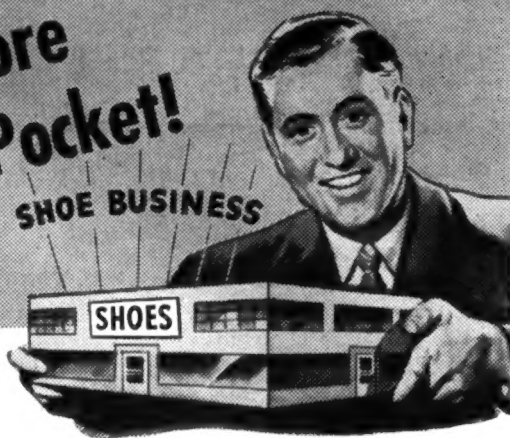
"She's all right, Tray," the Cross L boss murmured. "She and Robert are running the store, and Derby will see that they have no trouble. She said—she mentioned she would still be there.

THE END

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